

Harry Potter

and the

Daughter of Darkness

Chapter 1

Woodruff and Shwartz

by Ri-kun

The afternoon sun was stretching itself far west along its ever-steady path, allowing a cool breeze to drift down the street of Privet Drive towards Number Four. Outside in the garden knelt a single figure, alone in his work and covered with soot. Harry Potter removed his glasses to wipe some of the dirt off them, and in the process ran a finger along his lightning-shaped scar. His body froze instinctively for a moment, but when nothing happened, he finally got moving again and resumed his work.

The rest of the street was relatively quiet for such a warm July afternoon. Most children would be taking advantage of the semi-mild weather by rushing outside in their bathing trunks, and playing in the sprinklers or diving into their newly-dug backyard pools. Adults should have been moving back and forth, either busying themselves with their own yard, or rushing to and from work. Very few people emerged from their houses, though. The sound of children playing was almost non-existent. And though the sun hung high in the clear blue sky with very few clouds to blot it, an indistinct chill crept through the air. The breeze that should have been a refreshing comfort carried with it an ominous feel. It was as if all the joy in Little Whinging had been sucked dry.

People were afraid. The young man named Harry could tell, though he doubted seriously he was the only one that sensed it! Everyone else in Surrey had been keeping a low profile since the start of summer. The news was ripe with tales of disaster and unexplainable phenomena. There had been that unfortunate typhoon the weather channel had yet to explain, and the earthquake over London Bridge

that'd killed hundreds, even though there was no visible fault line anywhere in the area. Also, a fire had broke out near Brussels, causing a number of homes to simple burst into flames, almost at once! And then there were the stories of some strange, as-of-yet unidentifiable disease that'd claimed dozens so far. New reports were urging the populace to not panic, since the death toll was relatively small thus far. Yet a boil report had been placed on all water supplies for the time being, just as a precaution.

It was all rubbish, of course.

There'd never been a typhoon to begin with. That was a clan of giants attacking up and down the coastline, ripping up trees and tearing the rooftops off people's houses! The Ministry of Magic had spent days trying to smooth that one over. And it was just the beginning!

The bridge collapse was Death Eaters, servants of the Dark Lord Voldemort, sending a message to wizards who's tried leaving the country by disguising themselves as Muggles. Muggles were non-magical people who knew nothing of the world that Harry himself was connected to. It was probably best that they stayed in the dark on what was happening. Harry wasn't so sure he'd like to know the truth, if the option had been open to him. The fire had been Death Eaters, as well, just some sport at Muggle's expense from what the Daily Prophet said. And there was no terminal disease that seemingly killed people in their homes without warning. That was the killing curse, Advada Kedavra, the most Unforgivable Curse known to wizard kind. Harry had seen it used before on at least three seperate occasions, and it was lethal when cast properly!

He should know, since it'd been that very curse that took his parents' lives when he was but a baby, and given him the very scar that graced his forehead. Harry was leering of it, especially since the past year, when the connection that very mark represented had given him glimpses into Voldemort's mind. He'd been afraid for awhile now that his summer would include the same flashing images, but there had been nothing. Harry could still the Dark Lord's presence if he tried hard enough, but there was no more pain or aches coming from it. The scar had been curiously silent of late, which made him wonder why. It was a big relief to not experience strange lurches in his mood

that had nothing to do with him, of course. The last vision he'd gotten had come at a great cost.

Harry picked up his gardening tools and carried them back to the shed. He would take a quick break and have a snack, then finish up working on the jasmine bushes before it started getting dark. These days, most people on Privet Drive chose to remain indoors after the sun went down. The Muggles in Little Whinging might not know what was really happening, but they weren't entirely stupid, either! People could feel something wasn't right.

It was the dementors, naturally. Their presence had made life unbearable for most people, even for Muggles that couldn't see them. Dementors were soulless beings that sucked all the happiness out of a person, leaving them with only the worst possible memories in their heads. Harry had run into two dementors just a few streets away last summer. They'd been sent not by Voldemort, however, but an official of the Ministry of Magic, who'd been trying to silence Harry's insistent cries that the Dark Lord had indeed returned. He and Dumbledore had been martyred as liars and senile fools for most of the year, before the unmistakable truth was finally revealed before the Minister of Magic himself.

Former Minister, to be precise. The word had come through via the Sunday edition of the Daily Prophet that Fudge had stepped down at the request of the Wizengamot. Harry had a difficult time believing that someone as pompous as Cornelius Fudge would simply step aside at the mere advice of the wizarding council, but the truth was it no longer mattered anymore. Voldemort had returned after over a decade of absence. Harry had watched him rise up from the cauldron after ordering his servant Wormtail to murder Harry's classmate and perform the dark ritual that would restore him to his former power. Thinking about it still gave him chills!

Everyone in the secret society of wizards had thought Harry made the whole thing up to cover Cedric Diggory's death. They thought that he was a lying showoff, and Dumbledore bonkers for believing him. He still wasn't sure if he'd forgiven the rest of the magical world. Thinking about it made Harry angry. It seemed unfair that people were jumping

on board this late into things, when it'd been so much easier for them to deny the truth and live in ignorance.

Of course, ignorance was how Voldemort thrived, according to the headmaster of Hogwarts. Fear and suspicion allowed the Dark Lord to move about with ease, and so far, he seemed to be making good use of it. The wizarding world was on the verge of a mass panic! Harry had been back at Number Four Privet Drive for nearly two weeks, and already the tension could be cut with a knife. Even his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, who normally pretended that Harry's world and anything in it didn't exist, seemed on edge. They were no longer speaking with him these days, which suited him just fine. Harry preferred the Dursleys ignoring him to watching his every move like a hawk, ready to place blame for even the slightest misfortune.

Harry wiped his feet before entering the house. His Aunt Petunia didn't have the power to send him to the cupboard under the stairs, but she still shrieked at even the slightest bit of dirt he tracked in. The fact that keeping clean was impossible while working in the garden had escaped her. Harry could deal with her disapproving glares and snippy attitude, but he really didn't feel like bothering right now. The Dursleys had been sure Harry was up to something when he first began working in the yard. Uncle Vernon had accused him of trying to hustle money from his pockets, while Petunia insisted he would jinx their rose vines while her back was turned. Harry finally went up to his room and wrote to his friends in the wizarding world; Hermione, Hagrid, the Weasleys, all of them; and explained things.

He hadn't wanted any of the Dursley's money. His parents had left him a small fortune underneath London in Gringotts, the wizarding bank. There was enough gold and silver to pay for another five years of school, and probably live comfortably for the rest of his life! He didn't need anything from his aunt or uncle anymore. Harry had just wanted something to do while he waited for the enchantment the headmaster had placed years ago when he was a baby to take effect, so he could leave. Lying on his bed upstairs for two days straight with nothing to do but read about how no one was safe and that the Ministry was doing everything it could to keep wizards safe had been maddening! When nothing else had worked, Harry decided that

chores really weren't so bad, especially when one considered the alternative.

So, when his owl, Hedwig, came swooping through the window that evening with letters addressed to his aunt and uncle, things officially began to change! It was remarkable that neither of them screamed on sight of his snowy owl. Their last experience with wizard mail hadn't gone smoothly, and the fact that these letters were from fully-grown wizards who had the authority to use magic whenever they saw fit to didn't help things much. The Dursleys were informed in no short order that they were to allow Harry any freedom around the house he wished, provided it caused him no harm, of course! Mr. Weasley had offered politely to come over and fix any work on their gardens that his aunt found unsatisfactory, which was all Vernon Dursley needed to fly into a rage. Mrs. Weasley had been less cordial, and informed Harry that the moment he decided the Dursleys owed him money for backpay, he was to write them immediately. Harry had been tempted to do so out of spite, but resisted the urge.

Still, the idea of Uncle Vernon reaching into his wallet to give Harry money for the first time in history made him grin slightly on several occasions. The thrill was wearing off, but still he smiled slightly while making himself a sandwich.

The kitchen was just as immaculate as the rest of the house. Aunt Petunia generally kept things spotless in her home. She seemed to take it upon herself to remove even the slightest spot, while simultaneously watching the neighbors in case they happened to be doing something unsavory. Like, keeping their windows washed more often than hers. This week, however, Aunt Petunia had been on a real search and destroy mission. The Dursleys were planning to throw a house party to commemorate his cousin Dudley winning the regional championship boxing tournament. Dudley had discovered boxing last summer, and his continuing the Smeltings diet, as well as a newfound passion for weight training, had made him even deadlier than every!

Harry might have feared for his safety a couple of years ago, but his cousin didn't say much to him these days. For the most part, Dudley acted as though Harry weren't in the same room. Anytime at

breakfast he looked Dudley's way, his cousin would quickly avert his eyes, as though Harry were something poisonous. It was unlike Dudley to be so jumpy where Harry was concerned, but then, Dudley had endured numerous bad experiences with wizards before. Perhaps, Harry mused as he ate, they were finally beginning to catch up with him!

And then, there had been the encounter with the dementors last summer, where Dudley had nearly had his soul sucked right out of him. His parents had been furious with Harry, convinced he was behind the whole thing. But what really struck Harry as odd was the things Dudley had mumbled as the dementors swooped down on him. Even after nearly a year, he still wondered what his cousin had heard that was so awful. The Dursleys had always made it a point to spoil Dudley as much as humanly possible, and often in front of Harry to make him all the more miserable.

Harry finished his sandwich, and placed his dishes in the sink. He wanted to get out of the house before Aunt Petunia showed up, and tried to blame him for some invisible smudge on the breakfast table. He went outside and retrieved his tools from the shed, and continued late into the evening. The sun was beginning to go down by the time he decided to stop. He put everything back into the shed once more, and headed inside. By this point, Uncle Vernon was home. He had Aunt Petunia were undoubtedly sitting in the drawing room having a cup of tea together, while his aunt updated Uncle Vernon of what the neighbors had been doing inside their homes, and he undoubtedly bragged of a new sale on drills at his company. Harry walked all the way around the house to the front door so he could take the stairs and avoid seeing them. What few muscles aligned his almost-sixteen year old body ached terribly, yet he felt strangely satisfied. Knowing that in a few weeks he would be leaving this place made the work seem not so bad. Also, he was doing it of his own free will, as opposed to having it forced upon him day and night.

That was something of a large comfort.

Harry cleaned up and entered his room. The place was rather untidy, with newspaper clippings and pamphlets scattered everywhere. He was actually comfortable in the mess, as it was the only place in the

whole house where he could call home. The pamphlets had been sent out at the start of summer, urging wizards and witches to stay calm, and take extra precautions. Several of them contained tips and information about the Dark Lord, and how to best stay alive. None of them were worded that way, exactly. The Ministry was doing its best to put on a brave face these days in light of the obvious.

Harry drew himself up on his bed and eyed the newspaper clips for a moment. None of them said anything remotely helpful. He had long since lost faith in the Daily Prophet, what with them calling him a show-off and liar. He supposed that to most people, it really did sound like the Ministry was doing something. From where he sat on the bed, it looked to him like they were outnumbered and outclassed.

Of course, there were the ever-present reports of what Dumbledore was doing. He'd become nearly as much of a mainstay on the Prophet's headlines as Harry Potter himself. The Prophet spent much of their time keeping people updated on what Dumbledore was doing to fight against You-Know-Who. Those stories were actually of some comfort to him. It helped Harry a little to know someone was really doing things to fight against the Dark Lord. Of course, his picture was usually framed right alongside those same articles!

The Daily Prophet had certainly changed their tune where he was concerned, as his friend Hermione Granger had noted in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. The latest headline, which had been tossed against the wall haphazardly that morning, was now claiming him to be the wizarding world's champion.

"Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, is now the Wizarding World's Champion?"

The Prophet had been filled with such rumors and hints over the last several days, but now they were coming right out and saying it. People seemed to think he would be the one who vanquished You-Know-Who. It seemed strange to think that so many people would believe this without knowing the whole truth. It felt like a century had gone by, but in reality only a few weeks had passed since Harry and the rest of the DA had gone down into the Department of Mysteries, and fought with some of Voldemort's most ruthless Death Eaters over

a particular prophecy. A prophecy that he learned a few hours later, contained knowledge of himself and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named! Dumbledore had explained it to him after he'd returned to Hogwarts, beaten and battered, and still reeling from seeing his godfather fly through a black veil, never to return.

It was the prophecy that he was struggling to forget about. The prophecy, and the loss of his only remaining family. Sirius Black had been James Potter's best friend at Hogwarts, and had served as best man during his parents' wedding. Harry had thought like everyone else in the wizarding world that Sirius was guilty of the murder of thirteen people, but those crimes had turned out to have been done by a man named Wormtail. Harry had known for two years what it was like to have a parent to talk to, to go to an older adult wizard for help. Now, that was all gone, taken from him by Bellatrix Lestrange.

Sirius had been one of the few people to know of the prophecy, and what it meant for Harry. Again, against his will, he thought of the words that Dumbledore had conjured for him to hear in his Pensieve. 'For neither can live while the other survives!' That meant either he must commit murder to stop Voldemort, or Voldemort would kill him. And again, he wished Sirius were alive to give him advice. But Sirius Black was gone now, and Harry was alone with the knowledge of what he must someday do.

A tap at the window knocked Harry awake from his depressing thoughts. It had almost felt for a moment like he had been falling asleep. Harry stood up to open the window, but instead of Hedwig, a tawny barn owl swooped through rather majestically. Harry recognized it as one of the owls from Hogwarts, the wizarding school he attended for much of the year. The owl extended its leg to allow Harry access to his mail, observed the room with an almost disapproving glare, then flew to Hedwig's empty cage for a drink of water. It was gone out the window before Harry had time to open his letter. Hedwig was undoubtedly still out hunting for mice, but Harry was used to her being gone.

He knew who the letter was from immediately by the scribbly handwriting.



Dear Harry,

I hope this letter finds you well, and you are doing your best to stay safe in light of the circumstances. If it is at your convenience, I will be bringing along a visitor to meet with you this evening, concerning affairs of state that I feel must be brought to your attention. Alls fairing, we will arrive at your place of residence at seven.

Until then,

Yours faithfully!

Professor Dumbledore

Harry held the letter in his hands for a moment, feeling confused. There wasn't a mention of his headmaster coming to fetch him from Privet Drive, which Harry admitted was what he'd been hoping for! It sounded as if Dumbledore were just coming for a visit. But then, who was this visitor he mentioned? He then glanced over at the clock next to his bed, and saw that it was very nearly seven!

Something felt odd as he descended the stairs to answer the door. Aunt Petunia was already getting up to see who was calling at such a late hour, wearing her usual disapproving glare as she spotted him. He reached the door first, and smiled automatically at the sight of Dumbledore's crinkled eyes and broken nose.

"Good evening, Harry!" the headmaster said cheerfully.

"Good evening, Professor Dumbledore," he replied, suddenly feeling very nervous. The last time they'd really spoken with one another, Harry had broken a number of Dumbledore's possessions in a fit of rage. Remembering it made him feel ashamed, but Dumbledore merely smiled at him as if the incident had never occurred.

"I realize it is very late, but could we trouble you for a moment of your time? This is Woodruff, of Woodruff and Shwartz, a wizarding legal firm. He has come to discuss with you the terms and conditions of Sirius' will."

"His will?" Harry felt a lump come to this throat.

"Ah, Mrs. Dursley!" he nodded, moving right past Harry like he suddenly wasn't there. "We've spoken several times in the past, though I don't believe I've had the pleasure of addressing you face to face. My name is Professor Dumbledore, and I was wondering if..."

Petunia Dursley's eyes, though, had widened at the second mention of Dumbledore's name. She immediately let out a shrill cry, and fled to the back of the house to warn Uncle Vernon. Harry felt as though he should apologize to his headmaster and the strange man, a wizard dressed in robes that somehow reminded him of a suit. The man called Woodruff was extremely squat and round, carrying with him a suitcase Harry recognized as been made from Hippogriff skins.

"Well," Dumbledore said, turning around with the air of having just accomplished what he set out to do. "Shall we retire to the kitchen? I shant take up anymore of your time than necessary, and then we'll be off."

Harry could help but smile a little as they walked straight into the kitchen area. The Dursleys could be heard in the drawing room next door making angry cries against the outrage of having strange men enter their home without permission. None of them came through the doors to confront the intruders, however.

"Forgive me," Dumbledore said, once they'd sat down. Pulling out his wand, the headmaster made several elaborate gestures with his wand, and several cups filled with Olden's Firewhiskey appeared.

"Also," he added, settling down. "Just to clarify something, Harry. I'm sure you've read in the Daily Prophet by now about the numerous precautions against Lord Voldemort. Among them, as I'm certain you noted, was the setting up of a secret password to identify members of your family. Since we've never had the chance to establish one, I'm afraid you'll have to settle for the ramblings of an old man for a moment."

Dumbledore paused to take a deep breath. Harry couldn't help but notice in that moment how tired he seemed. "My name is Albus

Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. I have been your headmaster for five years at Hogwarts, and my favorite treat is lemon drops. Would that suffice, or should I continue?"

"No, thank you, professor!" he smiled slightly.

"This is Woodruff, as I mentioned before. Rest assured he has been tested for memory alterations, as well as the Imperius Curse. We took every safeguard I felt necessary to bring this news to you tonight, Harry. So, I wanted you to know that this man has my complete confidence. Anything you wish to discuss with him or myself will not be repeated."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Potter," Woodruff spoke at Dumbledore's nod. "Upon the death of one Sirius Black, whom I believe you shared a close relationship with, we disclosed the information left sealed inside his will on the date of June 31. It seems that you have been named soul heir to the entire Black estate. This includes the ample Black family fortune, which will be added to your own sum that was left by your parents, as well as the ancestral Black home of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Also, Sirius Black was specific in his wishes for you to inherit a particular item of his, one that I believe of a personal significance to himself. A single motorcycle, enchanted with the power of flight. All of this falls into your name, effective immediately upon the reading of this will to you. This magic cannot be revoked or contested. Do you understand everything I've said to you thus far?"

Harry nodded, glancing once over to where Dumbledore sat. "Yes, sir. I do."

"There is one minor problem, however," Woodruff added, looking over to Dumbledore as well.

"Right," Professor Dumbledore nodded. "It seems that the Blacks placed a number of magical wards upon Grimmauld Place, which have barricaded it. No one can enter or leave the place, at the moment."

Dumbledore paused for a moment, allowing this information to sink in. Harry knew at once what he was silently alluding to. Grimmauld Place had been where the Order of the Phoenix had set up their secret headquarters. If the place had sealed itself, then the Order was momentarily divided! It was possible there were even members still trapped inside, though that seemed unlikely somehow. Still, Harry realized the gravity of the situation at once.

"We're not entirely sure if the wards have sealed themselves only until the new heir has been sworn in. In which case, the reading of the will to you would have automatically reopened their doors. However, the Black family may have placed a special magical sigil on Number Twelve, to prevent anyone but a member of the Black family from inheriting the place."

"Which means," Woodruff added, quickly. "That the true heir to the Black fortune and estate would be one Bellatrix Lestrange."

Harry felt his blood boil at the mention. Dumbledore noticed his reaction, and jumped in quickly. "There is, however, one simple test you could perform to determine whether this is the case or not."

Harry blinked. "A test?"

"Yes," Dumbledore nodded. "For you see, if you have truly inherited Grimmauld Place, then you would have also inherited..."

Harry peered down at the photograph Woodruff was passing along to him. In it, a very small and warped looking thing was steadily pounding its fists silently against a hard floor. Tears were streaming from its revolting face, forming a puddle around him. Harry recognized who it was almost at once, and shoved the picture away.

"I don't want him!" he said softly.

"I realize your personal feelings in this," Dumbledore said sagely. "But all you must do this once is summon Kreacher to you and give him a simple command. If he obeys you, then you'll have indeed inherited the Black fortune, and Number Twelve Grimmauld Place along with it."

A look passed between them, then. Harry understood the graveness of the situation, of course. He didn't have to like it, seeing as how Kreacher was at least somewhat responsible for Sirius' death, but there were much greater things at stake. The Order needed a base of operations, and Number Twelve had been ideal for their needs. Sirius had hated the place, but it made Harry feel a little better knowing it would be put to good use.

"I've never summoned a house-elf before," he said softly. "I really don't know how to do it!"

"Just close your eyes, and think of Kreacher," Woodruff said at once. "If he has been passed on to you, saying his name allowed will bring him to your side at once."

Harry swallowed a lump in his throat, and tried not to clench his fists as he thought of Kreacher's rather disgusting face.

"Kreacher!" he hissed between his teeth.

There was a loud crack, and several things happened at once. A shriveled house-elf dressed in a dirty pillow case appeared at Harry's feet, and immediately began pounding his fists against Aunt Petunia's spotless kitchen floor. Aunt Petunia herself suddenly gave out a loud shriek as she fell forward through the door, and landed with Uncle Vernon and Dudley falling right behind. Vernon managed to squash his wife, who remained completely covered by his girth, save for her horse-faced head. Dudley, however, tripped over the both of them and went flying forward into the breakfast table. Firewhiskey and china went sailing through the air as Harry's cousin tipped the table upward. He and it came crashing down, as the whiskey and cups shattered against the window, breaking both.

All the while, Kreacher was still pounding his fists, just as his picture had moments ago. Only this Kreacher came with sound, and the disgusting little house-elf was making it a point to be heard.

"No! No! No! NO! NO! NO!" Kreacher screamed, hammering against the carpet. "Kreacher will not go! He will not go! He will not go!"

"That's one part of the test confirmed," Woodruff spoke, trying to talk over him. "I believe the only thing left is for you to give him an order..."

"NO! NO! NO! Kreacher will not go! Kreacher wants to go to the Blacks! He will go to his new mistress, yes!"

"Give him an order," Dumbledore encouraged. "Just to confirm..."

"Kreacher will not go! He will not go to the Potter boy! He will go to his new mistress!"

"What's that thing going on about?!" Vernon cried out, struggling to climb off his wife. "What's it doing in here!?"

"Vernon!" Aunt Petunia cried out, rather weakly.

"Kreacher will not go! He will not go! He won't! He won't! HE WON'T! HE WON'T!"

"If you give him an order, this might stop," Woodruff said to Harry. "If I may suggest, please hurry!"

Harry tried to think of the most cruel and vindictive thing he could do to Kreacher that wouldn't actually harm him. Aside from freeing him, of course! Kreacher knew far more than anyone needed to know about the Order of the Phoenix. Seeing him free was out of the question. He tried to think of something; something horrible! But Kreacher's tantrum was making it impossible to think!

"Kreacher!" he finally screamed. "Kreacher... SHUT UP!"

Instantly, Kreacher grabbed hold of his mouth as though he might vomit. For a moment, Harry half-hoped he was choking somehow. Kreacher indeed gasped and coughed for a moment, like his air passage was blocked. Finally, he threw himself back down on the floor and began punching and kicking it again. A fierce, if silent, protest against his fate.

"Well, I suppose that's all settled, then." Dumbledore got to his feet and nodded once to the Dursleys, who were still keeping their distance from everyone, particularly Kreacher. "If you wouldn't mind seeing us out, Harry, we'll be on our way!"

Harry tried to avoid looking at their Dursley's glaring faces as he led Professor Dumbledore and Woodruff to the front door. Woodruff bowed once in Harry's direction before Apparating off, but Dumbledore lingered for a moment. Harry had suspected he wanted to say more, and waited. Dumbledore seemed to know what he was thinking, and smiled.

"I just wanted to say congratulations, Harry."

"On... what?" he asked, bemused. Surely Dumbledore didn't think Sirius dying was cause for celebration.

"On passing your O.W.L.s, of course." There was a twinkle in the headmaster's eyes, as if he'd guessed. "Of course, I cannot claim to know that for certain, but given your performance during the Defense Against the Dark Arts exams... I must say, I've never seen Madame Pomfrey speak so excitedly!"

"Oh, right." Harry felt his face burn.

"I also, sadly, had a request to make of you. I'm sure you figured out during our meeting with Woodruff, but the Order has had to evacuate Grimmauld Place for the time being. With the house sealing itself, there was no way for us to enter or leave. Plus, the risk that it had indeed passed to another member of the Black family, as opposed to yourself, was too great to chance breaking in. There might have been additional enchantments, and I must confess I did not learn everything there was to the place during our tenure there."

"You can use it," Harry said quickly. "I don't really want it, and Sirius was happier knowing the Order could use it."

Saying so made his throat tighten. Dumbledore simply nodded, and gave a reassuring pat on his shoulder.

"You are very generous, Harry," the headmaster said. "I do appreciate your courtesy. Have you by any chance received your O.W.L. results?"

"No, Professor," was all he could make out.

"Well, they should be along soon. Until then, please take good care of yourself, and be extra cautious. These are trying times, indeed!"

There was a weariness to the way Dumbledore said the end of his sentence. Harry thought the headmaster was being awfully casual with him. Perhaps he feared Harry was still angry from the incident in his office. Harry wanted to tell the headmaster that he really wasn't, that he felt ashamed of the way he'd behaved. Even though, at the time, he'd felt it was warranted. But the words wouldn't come!

"Well, I believe I've wasted enough of your evening. Thank you for your time," he added, sincerely. "See you at the start of the term, in all good humor!"

Harry said goodbye as Dumbledore Disapperated, and his words were lost in the resounding crack. He stood outside alone in the twilight air a moment more, listening to the silence that blanketed Privet Drive. The place just felt wrong somehow. Muggles were scared out of their wits, and they didn't even understand why. The Dursleys had allowed Dudley freedom to wander wherever he pleased after dark, as they'd always done. His aunt and uncle were determined to go about their daily lives as if nothing were happening, in spite of the horrible reports that came through each day.

Turning around, he found that his aunt and uncle were both lurking a few feet away in the foyer. Dudley was nowhere to be found, but it was possible he'd been cowering upstairs in his room. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were each wearing looks of pure disgust, yet their eyes gleamed with a keen interest. Harry just ignored them and headed upstairs for his room. Before he got halfway, however, his uncle called out to him.

"Just a moment there, boy... Uh, Harry!"



Harry turned around and looked blankly at him. "Yes, Uncle Vernon?"

"What was that... er, what was going on?"

He could see the both of them were fighting the urge to scream at the top of their lungs. Another time, Harry would have reveled in it, but not anymore. Now, he just wanted to go upstairs and think about what'd just happened. He was possibly twice as rich as before, and now owned a motorcycle to boot. Uncle Vernon had always hated motorcycles.

"I just inherited a fortune from my dead godfather," he said in an empty voice. "The man that was with Professor Dumbledore is a lawyer, I think."

"Your godfather... he's dead then, is he?" Uncle Vernon didn't sound the least bit sad. He'd lived in fear that Sirius would show up one night while they slept and murder them, or perhaps transform them into bats and then murder them! Harry had neglected to inform them that Sirius had been innocent of all charges.

"Yes, he died trying to save me from Voldemort."

Aunt Petunia actually flinched a little. Harry could remember a year ago how she'd reacted when he explained that dementors had attacked he and Dudley. It felt peculiar that his mother's sister was the only other one in the house that understood the gravity of his statement. His aunt had spent years pretending Harry's parents had died in a car crash, and not killed at the hands of the worst Dark Lord in over a century!

"He really is back again, isn't he?" she asked.

Harry looked her in the eyes, nodded. "He's back. He killed my godfather, trying to get to me. I don't know where he is now, but you're all safe here for the moment."

"Oh," Harry added, turning back around. "I've also got a motorcycle now. Goodnight!"

His room felt cold and empty, despite the window being open. Harry knew his feelings had nothing to do with the temperature, or the chill that crept in just now. It was the first time he'd talked to anyone about Sirius dying. He hadn't mentioned it when he came back to Privet Drive. The Dursleys, of course, would be overjoyed to learn there was one less wizard in the world. All of his friends had been there when it happened, even if some of them had already fallen unconscious by the time Sirius was thrown through the veiled curtain.

Most of the people who knew Harry had known how much Sirius meant to him. Some of them, like his former Dark Arts professor, Remus Lupin, had been friends with Sirius long before he died. It felt to Harry like he'd only known his godfather for a few days. Everyone else had spent years with him, getting to know him for the person he was. What felt so frustrating for him now was knowing what was going on outside the Muggle world. People were dying, the Ministry was way behind from living in denial for so long, and Harry was torn from wanting to do something about it, and wishing he could just spend the rest of his life working in the garden.

It was shameful to admit it, but Harry really didn't want to be the wizarding world's Champion. Part of it was knowing that the entire magical world expected him to save them after they'd turned their backs for nearly a year, but that wasn't really it. He kept thinking about how useless it'd been fighting the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries. He and his little rag-tag band of soldiers had done little more than run away while the Death Eaters blasted their way through every spell they'd tried! Voldemort's followers were powerful, and more importantly, weren't afraid of using it. Harry was outnumbered and outdone, long before he ever had the chance to try. And even if he did somehow manage to get past all the Death Eaters and other magical creatures Voldemort had guarding him, the prophecy had made it clear there was still a very real chance he would fail.

In the end, it seemed he was doomed from the get-go.

The thought should have made him feel worse than it did. For the most part, Harry felt nothing about the entire situation. He had no family to grieve for him, no one to really cheer him on, or hear his

mournful thoughts concerning his fate. The Dursleys could care less if he was slated to die! More than ever, Harry felt trapped on Privet Drive, cut off from the only people who might have cared about him. Here, he was well and truly alone. What frightened him the most was the suspicion that this numb void inside his chest would not abate in a few weeks when the charm finally allowed him to leave. He'd been meaning to ask Dumbledore how long it would be before that happened, but the thought had slipped his mind.

He was well and truly alone now, but what bothered him was how little it seemed to matter.

Harry decided to climb into bed. It was far too early for sleep, but he really didn't want to stay away just sitting in his room with his morose thoughts. Hedwig still wasn't back yet, so Harry kept the window open for her. He hoped she would return soon. Having her around made living on Privet Drive the slightest bit more bearable. If only a bit!

He didn't bother changing into pajamas. Harry spent the first hour or so staring up at the ceiling, thinking how strange it looked to him. Even the ceiling seemed unfamiliar, despite this being his room for four summers now. He didn't feel the slightest bit tired, yet after a while, Harry had the vague sensation that he was waking up. More to the point, he suddenly knew that someone was in the room with him. Harry reached over for his wand on the nightstand. His hand fumbled around for a second, before realizing with a jolt that it wasn't there.

The room was very dark now. He could tell by the clock that it was late, but the room still looked darker to him than it should have. He searched for his glasses, then realized they were still on his face. Something moved nearby, and he tried a spell, knowing it was pointless. To his shock, a light flashed just inches from the bed, revealing a shadowed figure standing not far from him. The figure was holding his wand, and quickly dropped it upon realizing what had happened.

Harry raised up on his bed, searching the room for the figure he'd seen. This wasn't the first time his bedroom had been penetrated by a magical being. Of course, it was entirely possible that this was a simple burglar, caught in the act of robbing the Dursley's home. Of

course, it seemed odd that a burglar would climb all the way up to Harry's window to break in, not to mention the fact that a Muggle burglar would never swipe Harry's wand. With a jolt, Harry wondered if it could possibly be a Death Eater come to kill him.

The thought seemed unlikely, since the charm sealed by his mother's blood kept him safe from Voldemort, and anything that belonged to him, so long as he dwelt here. Harry did not like Number Four Privet Drive, but it was still the safest place for him. At least, it had been until now! Perhaps the charm had somehow faded, or been tampered with? The thought crept into Harry's brain unbidden, and the longer he sat in the dark room, the more nervous he became!

He started to move ever so slowly, but the figure was suddenly in front of him. The shadow pounced forward almost like a cat, and suddenly there was a great weight pressing him down into his sheets.

Harry raised up as high as he could, and found himself glaring into the brownest eyes he'd ever seen. Surrounding him was an oval face, pale and lit by the light of his own wand. Dark hair framed the exotic face, leading down to a well-muscled and fully-formed female body. A lumped formed in his throat as the young woman watched him closely, not saying a word. She reminded him a little of Cho Chang, and for a moment, Harry actually believed it was her. Or, rather, perhaps an older sister, but a closer look showed that they were too different still.

The girl seized Harry by his wrists before he could move any further, and pinned them above his head. Leaning forward, she glared into his face for a moment, before raising up slightly to examine his forehead.

"You're Harry Potter," she whispered in a low voice. His ear tickled as her words breathed across. "Aren't you."

Harry found his voice, but it wasn't easy. He could already feel his face burning red. "I..." he stammered. "I'm... Who are you?!"

"Shhh!" she whispered softly instead, not answering. "Lie still."

"Why?" he demanded. His whole body was growing hot, now. Not to mention the fact that her waist was straddled across his, as though he were a saddle. This made things very uncomfortable, not to mention embarrassing!

"What's going on?! Who the hell are you?"

"No one," she told him, rubbing a cheek against his. "I'm no one."

Harry tried to strain against her grip, but the girl was deceptively strong. There was a strength and power behind her grip that could have easily broken him in two. Plus, his rearing against her hold caused several parts of his body to brush against hers. Harry's throat went dry when this happened, and he lay perfectly still.

"You..." he croaked. "You're not a Death Eater... are you?"

"No," she said softly, tracing a finger along his face. "I'm not here to kill you. I just wanted to be with you, just this once. Just for a moment!"

"Why?!" he wondered, eyes widening.

The girl didn't answer. "I wish you could understand. But you wouldn't!"

Harry could feel her nuzzling up against his neck now, running a tongue along where his blood now pulsed against the skin. She seemed to pay extra close attention there at first, before moving along down lower. He winced slightly when her sharp teeth gripped the skin along his collar bone. Harry's breath was coming in short gasps now, as she held it firmly in place. Finally, she let him go, and raised back up to kiss him hard on the mouth.

The room swam, and Harry felt himself being lifted up off the bed. His arms were free now, but rather than fight his way free, he found himself holding her in them, as she herself wrapped him in hers. Together, they kissed one another, not breathing except to gasp for air when she finally pulled away. The place on his neck where she'd held his flesh in her teeth burned sharply, but the skin wasn't broken.

Their eyes met for a moment, then suddenly, she was gone. Harry felt as though he'd blinked once, and missed her. It was possible she'd Disapperated somehow, despite her leaving without a sound. Harry might have dwelt more on the subject, but his brain had temporarily left the building. Coherent thought would return eventually, once his mind had returned from whichever of Jupiter's moons it was currently on.

And after he'd made a quick trip to the bathroom!

## Chapter 2

### A Battle in the Park

by Ri-kun

All through the next day, Harry caught himself jumping at odd noises, and flinching at shadows that moved ever so slightly in the wind. He'd woken up that morning with a pounding headache, and the feeling that something was very wrong. It took several minutes for him to remember what had happened. When he finally did, a blush crept up his face from way down below his neck. Remembering the pain there, Harry had leaped up out of bed to check himself in the mirror.

His skin had been perfect and smooth, and totally devoid of any blemish whatsoever. There wasn't a mark on him anywhere that he could see, except for the scar, naturally. And it didn't even so much as tingle. His wand rested in the exact spot he recalled putting it before going to sleep. He had, it seems, fallen asleep at some point. His clothes were very much wrinkled, in a state Ron's mother would have had a fit over.

A noise behind him had made him jump. Hedwig was watching him with a reproachful look in her eye, almost as though he'd been caught doing something wrong. Harry was reluctant to approach her, but when she beat her wings angrily, he complied. Harry felt rather silly a few minutes later as he refilled her water and put fresh owl treats in her dish. He also cleaned out her newspapers while he was at it, just for good measure. A laugh echoed in the back of his mind as he imagined Ron and the Weasley twins' reaction.

Harry had gone out to the garden immediately, forgoing breakfast. His mind felt as if it were clouded the whole time, though, and it was hard to stay focused. More than once, he found several minutes had gone by, with him staring aimlessly at a tool as if it contained vast hidden secrets! Around noon, he gave up and went inside. His stomach was growling forcefully by this point, demanding food. Aunt Petunia had, of course, neglected to feed him anything, so Harry made himself a late breakfast with toast and bacon. The house felt strangely quiet today. It seemed that the eerie silence that was

steadily smothering Privet Drive had made it's way into the Dursley home. Hopefully, he wouldn't be here for too much longer.

Harry considered heading upstairs for a bit. It'd been a couple of days since he'd written to everybody, and they'd made it clear that they wanted him to send Hedwig with word on how he was doing daily. He'd given his owl a couple of days off to herself so she could recuperate. Delivering to so many people over the course of the week had left her harried, and she'd been snippy with him because of it.

Harry finished up his meal quickly, and raced upstairs before he could change his mind. Hedwig was snoozing in her cage, a wing pulled up over her head to blot out the intrusive sun. He moved quietly around the room to retrieve the parchment and ink needed, then sat down carefully so as not to disturb her. He wouldn't ask her to deliver them just yet. The ink could have time to dry until she awoke later.

Dear Ron and Hermione,

I hope things are going well for your dad. Nice to hear he finally got promoted! I read all about it in the paper the other day. I also saw the advertisement Fred and George have for their joke shop. It sounds pretty amazing! I hope we can go see it in Diagon Alley. Do you think your parents will let us go get our books this year? I hear the Ministry has been patrolling there a lot, so maybe it will be okay.

A really weird thing happened to me yesterday...

Harry immediately crossed that part out. It left a nasty smudge on his parchment, and the ink looked as if it'd soaked all the way through to the desk underneath. He hadn't meant to bring it up. It'd just popped into his mind as he wrote things down. Ron was the last person he wanted to talk to about...

Well, about what MIGHT have happened to him! Harry wasn't convinced it hadn't been just a dream at this point. Everything had been just as it should when he awoke. Even Hedwig had been in her cage, sleeping as she was now. His wand hadn't been moved, and there wasn't a mark on his skin.



Something told him it'd been real, though. He couldn't put his finger on what, or how, but it'd been far too vivid. Harry's dreams had never been so... real to him before! Ron wouldn't know who she was in either case. And the only help the Weasley twins could give was roll around on the floor laughing their heads off at his expense.

Harry didn't even want to think how Mrs. Weasley or Hermione might react.

No, it was best to keep it to himself for the time being! Perhaps when he was finally able to visit the Weasleys before school began, he could find a moment alone with Professor Lupin or Arthur Weasley. Professor Lupin had been Sirius' friend at Hogwarts, as well as Harry's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, so he probably knew loads about Death Eaters. And Mr. Weasley now had a team of investigators working under him, searching for artifacts of dark power that might be used for nefarious purposes. He might have heard something at some point about...

Harry's face was growing red again, so he finished his letter quickly.

If Hermione isn't there, please tell her and everyone else that I said hello. I would have written letters to everyone, but Hedwig has been acting very tired for the past couple of days. I think flying so much delivering mail has worn her out, so I'm trying to keep my mail to a minimum. I hope everyone is safe.

See you soon!

Harry

Satisfied, Harry rolled up his letter and placed it carefully next to Hedwig's cage. She could sleep a little while longer while he worked out in the garden some more. Harry felt a little better now. His mind no longer seemed quite as foggy as before. Getting up, he closed the door behind him and headed downstairs. The house felt empty to him. Aunt Petunia had apparently taken Dudley out with her. The Dursleys were usually so paranoid about leaving him alone, thinking he'd set fire to the place, or blast everything in sight with magic. The

knowledge that he could do whatever he wanted for a little while was thrilling.

Harry wound up in front of the couch for a bit, watching tv. An old show that Dudley once loved, The Great Humberto, was playing. Harry watched it for a bit, then channel surfed from one station to another. Pretty soon, he was getting bored with it. Dudley had always hogged the television as a child, never allowing Harry to see what he wanted to. Some of the shows were pretty good, but much of it was dull stuff. After a while, Harry got up and went outside.

As he was bringing the tools back into the yard, Aunt Petunia pulled up in the second company car Uncle Vernon had purchased for her with the Gruntings credit line. Dudley was indeed with her, and kept a close eye on Harry the whole time his mother unloaded bag after bag from the back seat. Harry saw a number of the things she carried with her looked like party decorations. There were balloons and streamers, as well as polka-dotted hats. Harry tried to imagine the look on Dudley's face when his gang showed up to find the whole house decorated for a six year old's birthday party.

For Dudley's sixth birthday party, the Dursleys had rented a pony for him to ride around on in the backyard. Harry had been forced to hold onto the leading rope while his cousin paraded in front of his gang in a cowboy hat. He'd never been given a turn.

If Dudley was worried about what his gang would say when they were forced to all wear silly hats and play Pin the Tail, which Aunt Petunia had also picked up, he didn't let on. All his cousin did as Harry went to work was stand in the driveway and watch him. Harry, for the most part, pretended to ignore him and began digging up the weeds in the bed of lilacs. After a while, Dudley went inside and didn't come back out. Harry worked for the rest of the day, stopping only for water breaks, and to admire what he'd accomplished so far.

By the time he'd stopped, it was getting close to sundown. Harry put everything away and went inside to clean himself up. He was filthy, and needed to get clean before his aunt found him and threw a fit. Upon entering his room, he found a neatly folded letter on the bed. It was an invitation, he saw, to Dudley's party. Harry flipped through it

only half-interested, then threw the whole thing in the trash. He wasn't sure what sort of odd game the Dursleys were playing, but he wasn't about to fall for it.

Once he was clean, Harry woke Hedwig up and tied the letter to Ron around her leg. She seemed rather annoyed with him, but dutifully gave his finger a gentle nip when he was done, before flying out the window. Now that was taken care of, Harry had nothing left to do. His room could use a good cleaning, of course, but he found himself putting it off. It seemed like a waste of time, in any case, since he'd be leaving here soon. Surely Dumbledore didn't plan on him staying here for the whole of summer vacation. Not until the start of term! He'd always been allowed to leave before then. Even last year, when Voldemort had first returned!

Sighing, Harry sat down on the edge of his bed, letting his feet bump up against the trunk. He kept all of his school supplies and books in there, as well as several magical devices he'd collected over the years. Inside was also the Invisibility Cloak he'd inherited from his father. Harry considered opening it up to take the Cloak out, just so he could feel the shimmering fabric in his hands. It would be nice to hold something of his dad's right now. Something that his father had worn at some point, before passing on to Harry. He wondered for a moment if James Potter would've given the Cloak to him by now, if he'd lived. Would his mother have even allowed it?

Probably not. At least, not without a fight!

Of course, he would never know. Harry's knowledge of his parents was limited, at best. Sirius had very few opportunities to share with Harry his experiences growing up with James. And Remus rarely spoke of his time at Hogwarts, beyond the night they'd all discovered Wormtail was still alive. He considered for a brief moment writing to Professor Lupin. He wasn't sure where the former Dark Arts teacher was these days. Most likely working for the Order, but Harry was sure Hedwig could find him. Of course, he'd just sent Hedwig out to deliver a letter to Ron, which made the whole idea pretty pointless!

Harry jumped slightly at the sound of something beating at the window. Getting up, he looked out to find a light fog had laid itself

over Privet Drive. It wasn't the time of year for it, which meant dementors might be nearby. Harry could remember how cold the air felt whenever they came close, and there was a definite chill coming through into his room now. He wasn't feeling particularly depressed. At least, no more than usual. He couldn't hear the voices of his parents as they died, which was usually the first thing to run through his mind during a dementor attack. Harry thought he saw a shadow flicker nearby out the corner of his eye. Something had definitely been there, but when he looked closely, it was gone.

He had a sneaky suspicion of what was going on, but needed to be sure. Going to his truck, he removed the Invisibility Cloak and threw it over himself without hesitation. At the bottom stuffed in a pair of socks was the Sneakoscope that Ron had gotten Harry for his birthday. Harry pulled it free and stuffed it in his pocket underneath the Cloak, grabbed his wand, and headed out the door. Dementors were said to be able to sense people hiding underneath Invisibility Cloaks, but that wasn't the reason Harry was wearing it. He had the Patronus Charm to keep him safe. The Cloak was in case it was something else out there, and the Sneakoscope would tell him if they were close by. He had everything he needed as he snuck out the front door, but that didn't stop the lump from forming in his throat!

Harry searched the front yard as best he could through the thickening fog for any signs of life. Nothing moved, save for a stray cat sitting up on the fence that dashed away abruptly. Harry watched it leave with his wand at the ready, but nothing else so much as twitched. When he was sure the coast was clear, Harry continued onward down the road.

Sounds could be heard from a distance. Harry listened for any sign of someone, but the whole neighborhood was deathly quiet. Even the lights coming from the houses appeared dimmer. No one was standing out on their porches, sipping tea and shooting reproachful looks his way. Harry had grown used to the stares and resentment people in Little Whinging sent his way. Uncle Vernon had done a good job of convincing people that he was a no-account delinquent in desperate need of being locked away for good. But even the people who loved to stare long and hard in his direction until he moved along

were absent. They wouldn't have been able to see him underneath his Cloak in any case, but Harry knew he was being watched.

It had started from the moment he stepped off the front lawn into the street. Someone was following him, slowly and steadily. Harry felt their eyes watch his every step as he continued down the road. In the fog, it might have been difficult to spot him, but whoever was doing it could see his every step clearly. He had gone from looking for who was watching him to being the watched! What was funny was the Sneakoscope hadn't so much as quivered once. They weren't a threat, it seemed, which meant it was probably just a member of the Order keeping watch on Dumbledore's orders.

If it was a member of the Order, then Harry could rest at ease. Still, the eyes following him didn't feel remotely friendly. And the Sneakoscope was suppose to light up and spin if there was anyone untrustworthy around. And the list of people who he knew could see through Invisibility Cloaks was short! There were only two, really. Professor Dumbledore was surely too busy to spy on him this way. That left Mad-Eye Moody, the retired Auror and Order member that'd been impersonated by a Voldemort supporter in Harry's fourth year. Mad-Eye had always made Harry a little uneasy, which could theoretically account for the bad feeling he was getting. If it was Moody, however, he was safe.

One of the things Mad-Eye had tried to drill into Harry and his friends, however, was constant vigilance. If it was an Order member, with a magical eye or not, they should identify themselves. Harry was probably safer under the Invisibility Cloak. Members of the Order of the Phoenix wouldn't attack him. If it was something else, then...

Then this was most likely a trap, and Harry had walked right into it!

Harry stopped and tried to think carefully. The best strategy was to head back towards Privet Drive and get help. The moment Hedwig returned, he would send a letter for help, informing the Weasleys of what had happened. The fastest route was to just turn around, but Harry didn't like the idea of walking right back towards whoever had trailed him here. The park was just up ahead, though, and if he walked through it, he could get back to Number Four by doubling

around. Plus, the park was full of trees and bushes to get lost in, so it would be harder for someone to follow him. Very few people knew Little Whinging as well as he did, so the advantage was his for the moment.

Harry ducked into the park the moment he found the gateway. Someone had already closed it, but they'd neglected to padlock the iron gates. Iron, he remembered, could keep out certain types of magical creatures, too. Harry took enough time to push the padlock in before moving on. He could still feel the same eyes watching him, but they were farther away now. Up ahead was the swings that Dudley's gang had destroyed last summer. The city still hadn't repaired it yet. Harry kept his wand in hand at the ready as he moved past towards the thicket of trees not far away.

He was moving through them now, slowly but surely. His cloak didn't drag the ground nearly as much as it used to, but the edges still got caught in branches and twigs. More than once, Harry almost tripped over a limb stretched out in front of him. The wood was silent now. Not even birds sang overhead! It made him very uncomfortable. He needed to get out of here quickly.

Harry's foot caught on something that felt like an oak tree root, sending him sprawling out in the dirt. His cloak fell off in the process, leaving him exposed to the night air. Harry fumbled around in the dark for several minutes, first looking for his glasses, which were now smudged. Next, he searched for his wand, which lit up the moment his fingers closed around it without him uttering so much as a word. Now armed, he picked his cloak up and dusted it off. The light from his wand flickered against something crouched against the tree trunk, causing him to spin around.

A pair of shining dark eyes surrounded by a pale oval face looked up at him, fearfully. For a moment, Harry thought it was a house-elf. As he looked more closely, however, he saw it was a young girl! Her straight dark hair framed her face, and she was giving him a wairy expression. He wasn't certain in the darkness, but it looked as though she might be Japanese. Harry realized with a jolt that this was undoubtedly what he'd tripped over!

"I'm sorry," he said, crouching down next to her. "I didn't mean to trip over you! Are you alright?"

He then saw that her eyes were very puffy, and almost seemed to be getting puffier by the minute. "Have you been... crying?" he asked.

The girl looked at him for a moment, then nodded. She couldn't have been more than ten or eleven years old.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, feeling foolish.

"I'm lost," she suddenly spoke, very quietly.

"You got lost," he repeated, wondering for all the world why.

"I was playing in the park, but then it got dark all of a sudden," she explained, still speaking in a soft, slow voice. "I tried to get back home, but it was so dark, and I was afraid."

"Did you come here with your mom?"

The girl shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. "I don't have a mom," she whispered, barely audible. "She died a long time ago."

"Oh," Harry whispered. "I see. My mom died a long time ago, too."

The girl looked at him. "Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "She was killed by... someone. They said she died trying to save my life."

Harry had no idea what made him say that, but the girl suddenly seemed to cheer up. "She must have loved you very much, then!"

He smiled, in spite of himself. "I'd like to think so."

There was a moment of silence. "Would you like for me to take you home?" he asked, abruptly.

The girl smiled at him and nodded. "I live back that way," she said, pointing deeper through the grove of trees. "There's an alley that leads to the road where my house is on. That's why I was trying to go through here. And then it got dark..."

"I understand," he said, offering her his hand. She smiled at him, but didn't take it.

"This way!"

Harry watched as the little girl lead him down through the nest of trees deeper into the park. It was slow going, made all the more difficult by how dense everything seemed to get. Harry was somehow reminded of the Forbidden Forest just outside the Hogwarts grounds. The ground was ladden with roots, yet somehow the girl was able to skip through everything with ease. Eventually, Harry caught up with her.

"By the way," he asked, trying not to sound winded. "What's your name?"

The girl just smiled. "My mom always told me not to give my name to strangers."

"Oh," he replied, not knowing what else to say. "Well, my name's Harry!"

"Nice to meet you!" she said. She definitely looked more cheerful now. "This way," she pointed. "The alleyway is just beyond those trees."

Harry followed after her, and sure enough, there was a small entrance in the fence of the back wall. Harry thought it looked like someone had torn one or two planks away, just to make a way in. It sounded like something Dudley and his gang would have done. The girl slipped through easily, then motioned for him to follow her. Harry did, and found himself standing in a much wider alley. It looked as though the passage was never meant to connect to the park. Harry didn't have time to think much on it, though, because the girl brushed her hand up against his to get his attention.



A sharp, icy chill ran through him as he looked down. She'd given him the barest of touches, yet her skin felt ice cold.

"Come on," she pointed back down to their left. "My house is that way!"

Harry was getting a very bad feeling now. The hairs on the back of his neck kept waving wildly, and he had the distinct feeling someone was watching him. Again! Eyes almost seemed to appear from over the top of the fence, but then would vanish the moment he looked directly at where they should have been. His mind must have been playing tricks on him. Once he had taken her home, however, he was going back to Privet Drive.

Suddenly, Harry realized the girl was no longer next to him. Looking around, he saw she was standing several feet behind. There was an odd look about her, as though she was suddenly immobilized. He knew then that something was wrong. There was no way anyone could stand as perfectly still as she was. The girl looked almost like a corpse, only right-sided. As he approached her, she gave no notice that she was even aware of him. It wasn't just her, either! The air around them had gone deathly quiet, like the night was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

"Be careful!" she spoke suddenly.

Harry actually jumped slightly at the sound of her voice. She was looking at him now with deadly serious eyes.

"I don't know how many of them there are."

"How many of what...?" She had gone back to being deathly still again.

"How many of what are there?" he asked again. "Who are they?"

The answer was right behind him. Even before Harry turned around, he knew someone was there. It was as though their very presence made the air around them tingle and hiss. He looked, and there dressed in a long black cloak was a strange, male figure. He was

standing a few feet away, closer to the mouth of the alley. There was almost something unassuming about his pose. As though he'd gone for a night stroll, and had just taken a wrong turn down their alleyway. Harry knew better than to believe that, however. There was a confidence about this person. Clearly, he had known they were behind him because they had wanted him to know.

"So, this is where you were, after all?"

The voice he didn't recognize. It didn't sound like any of the Death Eaters Harry had previously met. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Valerius," the stranger answered. His voice was thick, almost like smoke, but warmer. It still gave Harry the chills, though. There was something about him that just felt wrong.

"I've been waiting for you," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Really?" Harry asked, trying to sound calm. He was at a severe disadvantage now. "Did he send you after me?"

"He?"

"Stay behind me!" Harry muttered over his shoulder. "Voldemort," he then said louder. "Did Voldemort send you?"

"Oh," Valerius said, sounding unimpressed. "Him! No, the so-called Dark Lord didn't send me here to find you. My lady did!"

As wary as he was, Harry couldn't help but be intrigued. Other than Dumbledore, Harry had never met anyone who could speak of Voldemort so flippantly. Just who was this guy, anyway?

"I must admit," he said, walking closer. "I wasn't expecting the boy who defeated Him to be so... young!"

Harry immediately backed up, looking around for the girl as he did so. Strangely enough, he didn't see her. Before he could look behind him, however, Valerius was speaking again.

"You look nothing like the way people say you do. I suppose that is simply the price of fame, no?"

"I wouldn't know," Harry said. "Listen, whatever this is about, let the girl go first."

He could see what was up underneath the cloak now, and the knowledge did little to settle his stomach. A pair of slit irises parted golden eyes that were eying him as though he were something good to eat. Skin like marble shined against the black fabric of his cloak. He couldn't see the ears, though he knew they must be slightly pointed. He had never met an actual vampire before. There were plenty of pictures in his Defense Against the Dark Arts books, though. Now, one was staring him down, wearing an expression of utter curiosity.

"Girl?" he asked, sounding confused. "What girl?"

Harry looked around before he could stop himself. The alley behind him lay open and barren, without a soul in sight.

The girl was gone!

"How..." he began, then stopped himself. Valerius the vampire was giving him a suspicious look now. This quickly melted away like wax, revealing a calm and easy smile.

"Maybe I should try this again," he said, sighing. "I have obviously startled you, and that wasn't my intention. My... master, for lack of a better term, told me I might find the Boy Who Lived somewhere in this area. It's embarrassing for me to admit this, but I'm actually a big fan of yours. The Dark Lord killed a number of my brethren some years ago during his first rise to power, all because we wouldn't support his cause. You leading him to his downfall meant that my brothers and sisters were avenged. I have always wanted to say thank you for that."

Valerius paused, then started again. Harry, meanwhile, didn't know what to make of this. This had to be without a doubt one of the

strangest things he'd ever had happen to him! And that, unfortunately, was saying a lot! It almost sounded like Valerius was asking for his...

"Could I have your autograph?"

Harry blinked. "My... what?"

"I know this isn't really a good time for you, what with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and all returning. You must be very busy these days, and I don't mean to intrude. It's just that... Well, tomorrow I must leave the country for a bit, and this was my only real chance to see you up close. You must hear this all the time, I know."

"Not... really," he interrupted.

"Well, I promise I won't keep you. I really need to be going myself, but if you could just spare a moment... You know, it really would mean a lot to me!"

Harry was completely baffled. A vampire wanting his autograph?

"I don't have anything to write with," he said, finally. "And I'm... not allowed to do magic outside of school."

"Oh... right!" Valerius exclaimed, reaching in his robes to pull out a quill and parchment. Both were thrust right at Harry, who took them with great reluctance. All he could think about as he signed his name was how Ron would laugh himself stupid over this. He could even see his friend's face as he finished signing his name, rollin around on the floor at the Burrow with glee.

"Thank you!" Valerius said exuberantly. It looked as though he might start skipping in a moment. "This really does mean so much to me!"

"Well, your welcome," he replied, uneasily, backing away.

"Thank you again! I hope you find that girl you were talking about!"

Harry had actually forgotten about her for a moment. He looked around, but the alley wasn't big enough for anyone to really hide in.

Where could she have gone? Before he had a chance to think about it, there was a booming voice that filled the whole night sky.

"Novas Solarium!"

Something plunged down out of the sky like a comet. Valerius hissed in pain as it approached, doubling over with the autograph clutched tightly in his hand. With a jolt, Harry realized too late that it was going to hit in the spot between where they stood. He didn't have time to move, didn't even have time to think! The glowing ball of gold light struck the dirt, and there was a brilliant flash.

To his shock, there was no pain. Only an incredible warmth, like he was sitting by a warm fire in the common room. It was too bright for him to open his eyes, but the screams from the vampire not far away reached him all the same. As the light died, Harry opened them to find Valerius' robes were on fire. Not just his robes, either! His very flesh seemed to be burning, though the flames hadn't spread very far just yet. Reaching for his wand, Harry prepared to cast a water spell. But the flames spread too quickly!

"Curse you, woman!" Valerius howled at the sky. "What have I ever done to you?"

Harry didn't have to ask who he was shouting at. The answer came drifting down almost ethereally to the ground just a few feet away. Harry felt his throat go completely dry. It was her!

The beautiful stranger looked over at Valerius with a cold, neutral expression.

"You know better than to ask that, Val," she spoke in an deep, almost musical voice. "Two dead wizards in two months. Did you really think for a second the families of those people you fed off of would let you walk away?"

"I'm under Ministry protection!" he declared, though not sounding entirely convinced.

"You were under Ministry protection," she corrected. "Until you decided to let your appetite get the better of you! Two hundred and forty years old, and you still behave like a child!"

"My mistress will not like this!" he warned. "She has offered me sanctuary..."

"Oh, so you've got another master? Again?" The woman, whoever she was, looked almost amused. "That's how many in the past ten years?"

"Shut up!" Valerius suddenly howled, lunging forward at her. "Rayne!"

"Too easy!" she countered, and with that, had taken him down with a kick to his mid-section. The vampire staggered, then raised up to attack again. The woman... (Rain, was that her name?) suddenly whipped out two wands from somewhere up underneath the sleeves of her leather jacket. There was a bright flash, and Valerius went flying. She didn't give him time to recover, however, and with a few more spells, he was on the ground at her feet.

"You've gotten rusty," she noted. "Ten years is too long of a rest for you!"

"I've learned a few things since then," he countered, raising up slightly. She had her wand at the ready, though, and was pointing it at his throat.

"Oh, really?" she asked. "Like what?"

"Like how to bring along backup!"

Harry saw them leaping over the fence before she did. She was still ready for them, though. Harry watched as she cartwheeled over to where two had just hit the dirt, and fired two separate spells into each of their chests without uttering so much as a word. Both of them (Harry assumed they too were vampires) went down hard. The others quickly closed in on her. She then did some sort of complex wave with each wand, and a circle of pure fire erupted around her, encasing each of them in flame. All the vampires howled in pain and

backed away. Harry, meanwhile, couldn't help but be impressed. He'd heard about non-verbal magic before. They were supposed to start practicing it this year, in fact, yet he'd never seen anyone use it this way. It was like she was fighting and casting all at once, without making a sound!

"Order your blockheads to pull back, Valerius!" she barked. Her voice carried a distinct, yet muddled accent. "The only one I came here to get is you!"

"You'll never take me alive!" he swore, getting to his feet finally. Harry wanted to go over and help him, but thought better of it. He really didn't know what was going on yet, and it looked as though Valerius was losing. Still, he couldn't just stand back and do nothing!

...Could he?

"I never said I was going to," she countered, gravely. "But, if this is how we gotta play it..."

She gave her wand a flick, and suddenly a whip made of pure fiery energy spat out of it. Several of the vampires closest to her panicked, and immediately tried to get away. With another flick, she had him by the neck with the fire whip. There was a jerk, the vampire gave a scream, and suddenly it was gone. Something that looked like a head was torn away, but quickly dissolved into dust along with the rest of the body. She then whipped it around and caught another vampire the same way. It didn't even have time to scream before it's body was corroded. The other vampires looked at one another, then turned and quickly fled. One gave Harry a piercing look as it passed him by.

Looking back, he saw Valerius down on his knees again, begging for mercy. Her arms were spread out like wings, with each wand raised up and outward, glowing against the night. Valerius had a look of pure fear about him. Harry tried to run forward, but for some reason his feet wouldn't move.

"Combustus Inflamera!"

There was the smell of something foul burning, a bright burst of pure magical fire, and then...

Nothing.

Only the charred remains of his cloak was left. Harry felt his legs finally move, and he ran forward. She was picking up his cloak now and examining it.

"...can remember when he stole this," she was muttering. "The bastard who owned it wanted his head on a platter."

"What... did you do that for?" Harry blurted out. He hadn't really meant to say that. The woman didn't look at him, but rather reached down for something on the ground. Harry saw to his own shock it was a piece of parchment. The parchment he'd signed just moments ago for Valerius.

"That's mine!" he reached, but was stopped short as her wand pointed his way. Harry saw her read what was written there, then turn to stare at him in surprise. Recognition dawned on the mystery girl's face. In the light, he could see she was even more beautiful than he thought. It really was the girl from his dream, or whatever had happened last night!

"You..." she whispered. Her eyes flickered to his forehead. Before Harry could flatten his bangs, however, she had turned away. An awkward silence filled the air, then. Harry was now completely lost. He had the sudden feeling he had done something to offend her, which was utterly stupid since he was, for once, just an innocent bystander! And anyway, she was the one who'd shown up and blasted three vampires out of existence.

"He was a murderer," she said, suddenly.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Valerius," she answered by way of explanation. "He murdered two grown children of two wizarding families. They asked me to step in and take care of the situation, since the Ministry is a little tied up



these days." She then turned back to look at him. "That's why I killed him."

Harry saw she was looking at him as though waiting for him to react. Wondering why, he didn't say anything at first. She seemed to take his silence for something else, however, and looked away.

"I need to go. The families will want the cloak as proof."

"Right..."

She looked at him again, and this time she was wearing a sad smile. Her long, silky black hair hung down, concealing part of her face.

"It was nice to finally meet you... Harry!"

"You too," he replied, though he wasn't sure why. For some bizarre reason, his stomach felt like it had about a million butterflies in it. "Ummmm..."

"Rayne," she finished for him. "Just... Rayne!"

And with that, she was gone.

## Chapter 3

### Number Four Bombarded

by Ri-kun

The sun had been up for hours.

The room was actually beginning to overheat a little. Harry hadn't even gotten up to open a window on the off chance that Hedwig came back. His day had largely consisted of rolling over on his side to check the time, then drifting back to sleep. He'd been awake until the wee hours of the morning. Or, perhaps he'd been asleep all night. Either way, his body felt exhausted, like he'd competed in all three Triwizard Tournament tasks one after the other, minus any breaks! He couldn't recall what time he'd dozed off, or when the dream had started.

She'd been there again, though.

He'd felt the exact same disturbance as last time. Someone had been in the room. and when he raised up, Harry realized it was her again. At least this time, however, she refrained from leaping atop him like he were a horse. Not at first, anyway!

She'd said in the alley that her name was Rayne. When he called her that, she'd smiled at him and sat down on the side of the bed. Harry still wasn't sure what she had been doing here, but he remembered feeling the Sneakoscope pressing into the side of his leg. He'd fallen asleep in his clothes again, and forgotten to empty his pockets. But there hadn't been so much as a flicker from it, even when she ran her fingers up along his arm.

He could still feel her touch, even now. It made his eyes water just a little bit, thinking about her. Somehow, he'd ruled out the possibility that she was a Death Eater. Harry wasn't quite sure how, or when the certainty had come, but it was clear to him.

Very clear!

She didn't behave like a Death Eater did. His mysterious visitor was definitely dark, maybe even a Dark wizard, but no Death Eater. All of Voldemort's followers moved around like the world owed them some enormous favor. Harry had seen it too many times to forget. The girl, whoever she was, was as silent as a cat. She moved a bit like one, too. Harry had been reminded of Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, with the way she stretched and moved about.

They had kissed again. Or rather, Rayne had been the one to do most of the kissing. Harry was pushed back into the bed and told to lie still. He'd become frustrated with people ordering him about in recent years, but this was one time that had a big exception! He had found himself responding to her touch without thinking about it. Each time, Rayne would let him go so far, then pull away a little. It was like she'd been playing some intense game with him. Harry still wasn't too sure whether he'd been dreaming or not!

It was getting very frustrating.

Harry hadn't done anything in the garden. He was sure his aunt and uncle would complain, of course. They loved any excuse to badger him, but he'd taken the liberty of locking the door. It'd been the only time he'd gotten up out of bed, and it was just in the nick of time. Aunt Petunia had come along just moments later, tapping sharply to wake him up. When he didn't respond to her nagging, though, she finally gave up and went back downstairs. No one had come by to bother him again since. Harry was finding he liked it that way!

Harry ran his fingers through the misshapen hair atop his head as he looked over at the clock again and groaned. It was going to be a long day, for certain. He remembered with a jolt that tonight was supposed to be the big night when the Dursleys celebrated Dudley winning the regional boxing tournament. Harry was going to be treated to an evening of his aunt praising his cousin's numerous and non-existent virtues! That is, he was if he didn't find some way to get out of the house by this evening. Life on Privet Drive was reaching an all-time low. The most good about this summer so far had been the lack of dreams where people he knew were dying.

Having visions of a exotically beautiful vampire hunter still ranked lower on the scale, but only slightly.

Near the end of the day, he finally crawled out of bed. Harry washed himself up, more to wake up than anything, and changed out of his clothes. He was going to have to wash soon, but it could wait until later. For one thing, guests were already beginning to arrive downstairs. Harry wanted to be out of the house before they arrived. It felt like he'd been couped up in the Dursley house for ages. A fortnight had nearly past, but it might as well have been two months. If this was how it was going to be for the rest of vacation, waiting for something bad to happen while people on the outside kept dying, Harry felt sure he would go insane! He needed to get away, even if it was no farther than down the road.

He made it down the stairs and out the front door without a hitch, his wand and Sneakoscope in one pocket, and the Invisibility Cloak stuffed down the other for good measure. Once, just as he was shutting the door, Harry thought he spotted Dudley watching him. A quick glance proved otherwise, though, so he closed the door behind him and left. The fog was still hanging overhead, along with a dense feeling of misery. Harry guessed the dementors were at it again, which meant he couldn't stray far from Privet Drive. It infuriated him how he was left here alone to rot. Somehow, though, being angry and depressed had become normal here long before the great revolt on Azkaban. It was strangely comforting to him now, even. Which was probably not a good thing!

He had the feeling that he'd thought of this before, too.

There was very little going on tonight. The houses were all lit up, but there were considerably fewer windows shining out against the night sky. It seemed like the fog was not only keeping people indoors, but blotting out the streetlamps, too! Harry actually entertained the notion of going to see Miss Figg for a moment. Miss Figg was an elderly woman who kept dozens upon dozens of cats. Harry had been forced to endure regular trips to her house anytime the Dursleys went out. Miss Figg also kept a photo album of every cat she'd ever owned. She used to make Harry sit next to her when he visited, and look at each and every one.

He'd learned only last year that Miss Figg was in actuality a Squib. Squibs were children born into wizarding families that had no magical talent whatsoever. Harry had learned of them in his second year, during a nasty encounter with the caretaker, Filch. Miss Figg had been assigned by Dumbledore to keep an eye on Harry when he was still growing up. He realized she was the closest thing to a link with the rest of the wizarding world here in Little Whinging. It was depressing, but if he ever really needed help, she might have some means of contacting the headmaster. Harry really didn't want to spend anymore time here than necessary, but he had no clue as to when the charm would be complete enough for him to leave. If Miss Figg could get in touch with someone from the Order...

Still, it didn't feel like a real emergency to Harry. What more, he kept thinking of the photo album she undoubtedly still had somewhere in her house. Even if Miss Figg was willing to send a message to Dumbledore for him, he might still have to wait there. And in the meanwhile, there was Tibbles and Nibbles and who knew what other cat photos waiting! Harry had never missed Hedwig so much in his life! He supposed this was Dumbledore's way of punishing him for the way he'd behaved. It really hadn't been his headmaster's fault. Harry was the one who'd run off to save Sirius without thinking. Maybe Hermione was right, and he really did have a 'saving people' thing...

"Wow! And I thought I was having a bad night!"

Harry whirled around with his wand at the ready, and felt it shake in his hand upon seeing who was there. He quickly shoved it back into his pocket and looked the other way, so she wouldn't notice how much he was blushing. Rayne's footfalls made no sound in the darkness. It was as if she were a ghost moving across through the misty night. He could still feel her behind him, some way. His body was glowing hot, and the heat drifted through the air to reach for her.

"You looked like you were really bummed, so I just thought I'd come over and see if there was something I could do to help."

He smiled weakly at her, trying without success to keep the dreams of her out of his mind. "Thanks..."

"Rayne," she said, smiling. "Don't worry. I don't bite! You're pretty quick on the draw, but I suppose that comes with the territory."

"Yeah," he said, nodding a little too hard. "I guess so."

Harry hadn't actually forgotten her name. He was just having trouble forming complete sentences! Some part of him still couldn't accept the idea that she was real. Here was a girl that had literally come to him in a dream. Was it because of his scar? He'd seen things because of it before, but they were always of Voldemort. He wondered briefly if she could somehow be connected with the Dark Lord, but the idea felt far too preposterous. She was clearly not from around here.

Rayne was silent for a moment, then extended her hand. "I found this on the ground in the alley," she said, softly. It was the autograph that the vampire Valerius had asked of him. Harry couldn't remember now why he'd given it out. He wasn't into doing autographs. It was something Draco Malfoy had been accusing him of for years!

"Thought at first you might want it back, but..."

"Yes," he pressed, then blushed again.

"You wouldn't mind too much if I... kept it, would you?"

Harry hadn't been expecting that. "I guess so."

"You're sure? Look, I know you saw what I did, and it must have seemed pretty gruesome, but Valerius had it coming! He was wanted by the Ministry in two different countries, not including this one. So..."

"I get it," he told her quickly. "It really wasn't all that bad. I've seen a lot worse."

"Right," she nodded, looking away. "Of course. Forgot who I was talking to for a second!"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Rayne looked back his way, her eyes narrowing. "Run," she told him in a low voice.

"What?"

"Run!"

Harry looked around in confusion. The fog was thicker behind him, but he soon made out what she was referring to. Out of the denseness came two silent figures, pale and dark, moving as though they glided along the ground. Rayne was already backing away, motioning for Harry to follow her. He felt chills race up the skin of his arms, then down to his ribs as he followed after her.

Vampires!

There were more vampires. More to the point, there were more vampires in Little Whinging, which didn't make any sense at all! How in the world could there be this many vampires on Privet Drive?!

He and Rayne raced back down the street, with more coming out of the shadows all around them. There were more coming up the street their way, as well! They were surrounded, with but one other place left to run. Gritting his teeth, Harry seized Rayne by the arm and pulled her to his right. The Dursley house was lit up like all over, the only house of it's kind for miles. He remembered Professor Lupin telling him in his third year that vampires couldn't enter a threshold unless invited. It wasn't much of a home, but Dumbledore had told him as long as he could call it such, he would be safe here. Harry just hoped that same protection extended to anyone he brought with him!

Reaching the front door, Harry grabbed the knob and gave it a hard yank, only to find it didn't budge. Noise was coming from inside, which meant the party was still in full swing. The Dursleys had locked him out of the house! Killer vampires were coming up behind him, and they'd locked him out of his own house. Harry would have liked to express outrage at the treatment, but there really wasn't time.

"They're coming," Rayne said, looking back. "Stupid question, but can you fight?"

"We may not have to!" he replied. "Bombardo!"

There must have been a little too much oomph behind the spell, because Harry managed to blast the door right off its hinges, wreck most of the outer frame, and shatter several nearby windows!

"Sugoi," she said, impressively. "Ever heard of Alohamora?"

The racket coming from inside fell silent at once as the nearest vampire made a lunge for Rayne, who dropped kicked it in one smooth motion. Harry turned around with his wand at the ready, facing down two more that were coming up on him fast! There was a click off to his left, and Rayne was suddenly holding a wand in each hand again. He eyed her for a moment, then stared down the monsters in front.

Rayne handled one by leaping forward an impossible distance and tackling it head-on. He saw her fire off several spells one after the other, again using non-verbal magic to attack. The other vampire tried to move in on him, but Harry was ready. He'd never actually cast this spell before, but there was a first time for everything.

"Solarius Maxima!"

The yard suddenly lit up like it was high noon. Every vampire that came close suddenly howled in pain as the sunlight Harry summoned from his wand burned at their flesh. The one Rayne had knocked down was writhing in agony, but Harry didn't let up. The vampire soon burst into flames on its own and died. The others clawed at the places where their skin was burnt, then turn around and fled. The smell of scorched skin filled the air, mixing with the damp summer fog. Harry waved a hand around to clear some of the stink away. Rayne was walking up to him with a big grin on her face.

"Nice! Makes me wish I'd thought of it earlier."



The look on her face made Harry feel very warm on the inside. And it wasn't in any way connected to the burning vampires he'd frightened off! A sound behind them made him turn around. Aunt Petunia and Dudley, along with several other members of Dudley's gang, were standing in what remained of the front doorway, wide-eyed. He could see his Uncle Vernon coming up behind them, roaring at the top of his lungs.

"Now you've done it, boy!" he howled with rage. "Now you've done it! They'll chuck you out for sure because of this. You've got nowhere else to go! They'll never take you back after this stunt you've pulled, and don't think for a moment your aunt and I will just let you darken our doorway at a moment's notice. I knew this was going to happen! Ever since last year, when that peck of owls..."

"Vernon!" Aunt Petunia wailed

Vernon Dursley looked like he would continue his tirade, but fear of what everyone would think apparently took hold quickly. He looked around at everyone and saw their eyes solely on himself.

"Well!" Uncle Vernon said wearing a frightening grin. His hands were wound together, like he might have done to Harry's neck. "Why don't we go back inside and finish having cake, okay?!"

Everyone obeyed, mostly due to the unstable look in Vernon Dursley's eyes. Harry watched as his aunt and uncle followed behind them rigidly. Uncle Vernon paused long enough at the doorway to glare murderously in Harry's direction. He didn't seem to be paying Rayne any notice whatsoever. Vernon seized the door lying flat on the carpet and propped it soundly back up in the whole where it'd once stood. The message was not lost on Harry, though he could have gotten in with a simple push.

Rayne was watching him the whole time with a very sympathetic expression. "Nice place you've got here," she said, eyeing him warily.

"I'm used to it," he told her, shaking his head. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't they know you're allowed to do magic outside of school if your life is in danger?" she pressed. "Like, being chased by bloodsuckers and needing a sanctuary to hide in? Did the Ministry of Magic repeal that law when I wasn't looking?"

"They don't like magic that much," he explained, walking to the edge of the yard.

"Yeah, I gathered that!"

"It'll be okay. In a few weeks, someone will come for me, and I won't have to see this place for a long time!"

"What about until then? Where will you stay? Those vampires were probably working under Valerius, as hard as that might seem. He was never much more than a flunkie, but I can't see any other reason why they'd been here now! Which means they were probably here for me, and that makes it my fault you just got kicked out of your house!"

"I'll manage," he assured her. "This sort of thing has happened before. I've gotten used to it over the years. Best thing to do is just wait until they all go to bed, then slip in quietly. If they give me a hard time tomorrow morning, I'll just write to some friends of mine. That'll set things straight."

Harry paused for a moment. "I'm more worried about the Ministry of Magic trying to expell me for using spells outside of Hogwarts!"

"You used them defensively," Rayne said, calmly. "That's nowhere near grounds for expulsion!"

"I've heard that before, and they tried it regardless." It seems he was still bitter about the mock trial Cornelius Fudge had forced him to endure. It had been Dolores Umbridge who really instigated the whole thing. Harry learned that when she tried to use the Cruciatus Curse on him to learn where Albus Dumbledore had gone into hiding.

"It's alright, though!" Harry said to Rayne quickly, when he noticed the concerned look on her face. "Whatever happens, I'll just deal with it."

"I'm still sorry."

"Don't be. This might have happened anyway! I just need a place to go until things die down around here. From the way things seem, they'll be up for a while yet."

"Want a cup of coffee?"

"What?" The last time Harry remembered having coffee with a girl, it hadn't ended well at all. "Uhh, okay!"

"The place isn't too far from here. I'd be happy to keep you company until it's safe for you to come back?"

"Okay, sure..."

Harry followed Rayne off the Dursley's lawn back down the street where they'd come. His whole body felt light with tiny bubbles of excitement in his veins. A thrill went through him at the thought that he was getting to spend more time with her. Nothing made sense to him! She had come from his dream, but she couldn't just be a dream, right?

Rayne led Harry across the street to a corner where a shiney red motorcycle was parked. She pulled a helmet out of a compartment under the seat and tossed it to him before taking the one hanging from the left handle.

"Hop on!" she said, before strapping the helmet in place.

Harry gulped, but followed her instructions, and soon they were roaring along down through Little Whinging at a hundred miles per hour. Harry wanted to whoop for joy for the first time in what felt like forever! This was the most incredible feeling he'd ever had. It was almost as good as the first time he'd ridden on a broomstick back in his first year! The wind whipped past like blades, but he didn't care. Harry felt like they were actually flying along the surface of the road, instead of just riding on it.

All too soon, it was over! Harry gasped for air as he pulled the helmet off his head. His heart was pounding in his chest, and sweat was pouring from all over him, but he felt great! Rayne watched him for a moment as he leaned against a lamp post for support.

"Are you alright?" she said, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah!" Harry gasped. "That was... amazing!"

"Haven't you ever ridden a motorcycle before?"

"Not that I remember," he confessed. "But I've always wanted to. Never got the chance when I was a kid, since my Uncle Vernon hates them so much!"

"The guy who tried to prop the door back up?"

Harry nodded. "I think the only thing he's ever hated more than motorcycles is me!"

Rayne laughed at that. Harry found he liked the sound of her laughing. A lot! "Lets go inside," she said, leading him forward. "I'll buy you that coffee, and you can tell me more about the things your uncle doesn't like!"

Chuckling, Harry allowed himself to be taken in. As they reached the door, he saw in the reflective glass that his hair was standing straight up, even more so than it usually did. His hair had always been messy and unkempt, but now the front stood tall like he'd been electrocuted with a shocking spell. It was because of the helmet, he reasoned, but what caught Harry off guard was how much he liked the way he looked then. His looks weren't something he gave much thought to a whole lot, but now he wondered how he might look if it stayed that way.

Rayne paid for their drinks up front, and took Harry over to a secluded table near the window. He felt guilty about not having any Muggle money, but she assured him it was fine.

"No offense, but you probably spend as little time in the Muggle world as possible," she said, taking a sip of her drink. "From what I've seen, anyway."

"True. I never knew my parents left me any money until Hagrid took me to Diagon Alley just before my first year!"

"Who's Hagrid?" she asked, curiously, looking him deep in the eye. He was struck again by how beautiful her eyes were!

"Hagrid's the... Groundskeeper!" Harry couldn't think clearly for some reason. "He was the one who told me I was a wizard, and brought me my letter from Hogwarts."

"Do you like it there?"

"It's great! Didn't you enjoy it there when you..."

Rayne nodded affirmatively as realization dawned on Harry's face. "I never went to Hogwarts. I was a Durmstrang student from start to finish. It was very cold there!"

"I should have guessed," he said, feeling foolish. "I met someone from Durmstrang once. His name was Victor Krum. You've probably heard of him!"

Rayne's face was a total blank. "Should I have?"

"He places Seeker for the Bulgarian Quidditch team. I got to see him play two summers ago at the Quidditch World Cup when they took on Ireland's team."

Rayne started to laugh over her cup. Harry was worried that he'd done something wrong, but Rayne quickly set it down and smiled at him. "This is going to be really embarrassing to admit," she told him reluctantly. "But, I really don't follow Quidditch all that much."

"Really?" Harry couldn't help feeling surprised. "I thought everyone in the wizarding world knew about it!" Except for Hermione, he added privately!

"Oh, I know all about it," she corrected. "I just never had much opportunity to get into it. I didn't have a whole lot of free time growing up, and when I was able to finally get away on my own, Quidditch turned into one of the things I missed out on. You sound like you really love it, though!"

Harry nodded. "Quidditch was one of the first things I was really good at. I play Seeker for my House at Hogwarts."

Rayne shook her head. "I was never allowed to participate. I had a medical condition growing up, so it kept me from doing a lot of normal things. And my relationship with my family wasn't exactly... great, either."

"You know what it's like at the Dursleys, then..."

Rayne nodded her head seriously at Harry. "More than I wish I did, actually. No offense!"

"The worst thing is just being so far away from the rest of the world. Our world, I mean! I have an owl named Hedwig, and she sends letters to my friends for me, but during that time there's not really anything to do! I always look forward to school starting, just because it gets me away from here."

"You'll probably move away to somewhere far from here once you come of age and finish school, huh?"

"I haven't really thought much about it, but yeah! That would be nice."

Rayne's eyes darkened for a moment, as if she was remembering something very painful from long ago. "I didn't get to leave home for a long time," she whispered distantly. "My mother... forced me into working for her for years. When I finally got away, the only thing on my mind was putting as much distance between myself and everything I'd ever known! It took a while, but I managed. I moved all over Europe and parts of North America for a while. Being a Euratt just came naturally to me!"

"A... Euratt?" Harry felt he was going to be embarrassed for asking, but he'd never heard the term before.

"A Euratt is someone who does jobs for money in the wizarding world," Rayne explained to him. "It's like an Auror-for-hire! Not to sound insulting or anything, but you know what Aurors are, right?"

Harry nodded at once. "Right, so Euratts do more or less the same thing that Aurors do, but they aren't connected to the Ministry, or any other wizarding government body. They work strictly from person to person. Most people consider us unsavory characters, a lot like the way your uncle reacted tonight."

Harry snorted. "I'll take my chances. Considering some of the unsavory types I've met who really do work for the Ministry of Magic, they aren't ones to talk!"

Soon, they were laughing as though they'd known one another for years. More than once, Harry considered bringing up the dream he'd had about her, and every time he managed to talk himself out of it. It could only serve to humiliate him. Plus, it sounded strange even without the embarrassing parts. Before long, Harry saw that he needed to get back. The Dursleys would have gone to bed hours ago! If he didn't return to Privet Drive soon, someone was bound to notice he was missing.

Molly Weasley would probably lead the search party. That thought might have been funny, if it weren't so true!

"Thanks again for your help tonight, Harry," Rayne told him, after they'd driven back to Number Four.

"You did most of the fighting," he pointed out while struggling with his helmet. Rayne saw he was having problems and at once moved around the bike to help him. Their hands brushed up against each other as she pulled the helmet off. His eyes met hers, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still. Harry felt as though the earth had stopped moving.

"Your spell saved everybody," she said softly, gazing into his face.  
"You must do that often!"

Harry breathed. "I've been told I have something of a 'saving people' thing. It's gotten me into trouble more than once!"

"Don't listen to them," she replied, taking the helmet from his hands, but not letting go. "Whoever it was. You've probably saved them a time or two as well, I'd wager."

"Maybe..."

Rayne touched his cheek ever so gently. She had done the same thing the night before, when he'd dreamt of her! His breath caught in his throat as she held her hand there for a moment, letting the fire roaring inside him send sparks up to meet where they connected. Rayne moved away all of a sudden, like she'd been burned. Swinging a leg over her bike, she roared it to life.

"See you around, Harry!" she waved, before putting her helmet back on. "And I mean that."

He must have stood there in the road ten minutes after she road away. The engine could be heard in the distance, breaking the silence that hung over the town at last. Harry finally tore himself away and went inside. Uncle Vernon had taken some boards and nailed the door back on. It no longer opened at all, meaning he couldn't get in this way. Harry considered blasting it open once more, but resisted the urge. Walking around the house, he used the Alohamora spell to undo the lock, then walked through the kitchen for the stairs. That would be another bit of magic the Ministry could throw in his face, but Harry wasn't worried about it now.

He would dream of her again tonight.

He just knew it!



## Chapter 4

### Nyu Tattoo

by Ri-kun

It was Monday, and Harry was back to working in the garden again. He hadn't had a single dream of Rayne all weekend long, much less see the slightest clue of her around. What's more, he surprised himself by how badly he wanted to see her. She hadn't come by since their one night at the coffee shop. The Dursleys since then had made every attempt to throw him out. Each time the threat came up, Harry reminded them of the list of wizards who would descend on their home if they so much as tried to lock him out for an hour. This served to quiet Aunt Petunia, but Vernon Dursley couldn't be made to forget completely. Every few hours, he returned with some other new warning under his breath. And each time, Harry sent him away with the same promise!

Hedwig hadn't returned yet, which was beginning to make his vows of reporting them to the Weasleys rather thin. Harry had been getting worried this last day or so. It wasn't entirely strange for her to be gone this long, but each day that past brought worse and worse news! More stories of the 'mysterious illness' that left people dead in their homes with no signs of anything wrong were coming through. The Department of Health was going to step in with new safety measures if this persisted, which would do no good whatsoever. The Death Eaters were taking Muggle killings up to a new level! Four families had been found dead by neighbors across the country. There had been another widespread fire, this time just north of Dover. The police weren't even trying to call it an accident now, though they still couldn't determine where the fire started from!

The Daily Prophet had more accurate versions of what was going on, but even they were sketchy and vague at best. No one seemed to know what Voldemort was up to exactly, except for terrorizing both worlds at once! Dumbledore was being brought up at every turn. Practically every move the headmaster made was being reported to the public, and everyone wanted to know, including Harry himself, what his plans were for stopping You-Know-Who. Harry was used to

Professor Dumbledore being secretive, so this wasn't too unusual. Still, it would be nice to know what was happening with the Order.

And, of course, there were the reports concerning him. No one had much to say concerning his daily life. At least somebody was doing their best to keep the Daily Prophet from spying on him all the time. He really didn't want the wizarding community to see him watering the garden. Not while people everywhere were killed. At least he had something to keep the frustration from boiling over inside. Harry had learned from last year to keep his emotions in check. He'd allowed himself the luxury of anger too many times, and that had led Voldemort to discover how they were connected.

He could no longer afford to let his anger rule him. Harry didn't know exactly what it was that'd kept Voldemort out of his mind for the last few weeks, but he wasn't going to be the one to open that particular door again! Not without a fight, at least. It might be the only thing he could do for the moment, but soon he would return to the Burrow. Harry would find out what was happening then, and meanwhile keep his thoughts in check.

That, and wonder what was happening with Rayne.

Working in the garden had done little to drive her from his thoughts. He'd caught himself daydreaming over the last several days about her, just imagining where she might be. Though his dreams had been free of her, that didn't stop him from remembering. Harry thought back to the night on her motorcycle over and over again, and how incredible it had felt. As soon as he came of age, he was going to have to start using Sirius'. He would need to learn to ride one, of course, but perhaps Rayne could afford him lessons.

Assuming, of course, that she ever showed up again!

It was getting close to time for him to finish up. Harry threw all the weeds into the trash and put the tools up before going inside. He was sure to get another threat from Uncle Vernon, but the sight of Hedwig sailing overhead pushed the thought from his mind. Quickly, he dashed upstairs to his room, where she waited patiently as Harry tossed his gloves off so he could untie the letter. Once he had it free,

Hedwig flew over to her cage and took a long drink, like she'd been flying for days.

Harry tore open the letter without looking to see who it was from. He was so anxious to find out if the Weasleys were going to come get him soon that it took a moment for his brain to wrap around what he was looking at. The parchment was mostly blank, except for one sentence spread across the middle. It was written in a odd, blocky handwriting that didn't look familiar. None of the Weasleys wrote that way, and even if they had, he doubted very much they would send something like this!

What if she doesn't love you the way you wish she did?

Harry picked up the envelope. There wasn't a return address on it, which felt very wrong somehow. Hedwig had never brought him mail without knowing who sent it before. Picking both pieces up, he walked over to her cage where she was nibbling on some owl treats he'd set out for her earlier.

"Who gave you this?" Harry asked her.

Hedwig just looked at him blankly, like the answer should be obvious. "Who gave this letter to you, Hedwig?" he demanded.

Of course, Hedwig couldn't have answered either way, which meant he was wasting his time and probably looking very foolish right now! Harry threw the envelope and parchment both away and lay down on the bed. He was getting his sheets dirty, but it didn't matter. He was sure to be leaving soon! He had to.

There was a sound that drifted through his window, making him raise up. He recognized it at once, and leaped up off the bed for the door. Racing back down the stairs, Harry dodged around his Uncle Vernon, who began cursing at the top of his lungs in the direction Harry fled to. He was outside and looking up and down Privet Drive before his uncle could finish, though. It was definitely the sound of a motorcyle! Harry couldn't be sure that it was Rayne, but the odds were in his favor.

Harry realized with a jolt that Rayne was going to pull up to find him waiting impatiently for her. The knowledge sank into his belly like a cold iron. He couldn't just stand here waiting for her! That would be really stupid. He had to make it seem like he just so happened to be outside when she drove by. That way, he wouldn't embarrass himself!

Harry ran around in circles as the sound of the bike drew closer. There was no lawn furniture for him to rest in, and all the tools were back in the shed. Harry bounced on the tips of his feet for a moment, thinking hard about whether he had enough time to make it to the shed with something and dash back before she got here. Deciding to chance it, Harry raced across to the shed and tore the door open. There were so many tools for him to choose from, he couldn't decide at first which one would look right. Finally, he grabbed a rake that was leaned up against a wall near the back, which meant climbing over several more pieces of equipment first, and back again!

Halfway back across the yard again, Harry tripped over the garden hose he'd left out yesterday, and went sprawling out on the ground. His face was full of dirt and dead grass as he raised back up. The rake had smacked him upside the back of his head when he fell, and Harry could now feel a rather large lump growing there. Only as he stood up and walked over to the edge of the road where he could see better did it finally occur to him that there was nothing for him to rake! There were no leaves, naturally, since it was the wrong time of the year. And the grass was already cut and trimmed! Even if there had been work that called for a rake, he doubted it would be this close to the sidewalk.

The Champion of the wizarding world, Harry scoffed at himself. Only if he was planning to defeat Voldemort with sheer stupidity!

Harry pushed the thought out of his mind as Rayne's motorcycle grew closer. It sounded as though it were right up the road now. Harry began raking along the edge anyway with his head facing the ground. He could see out of the corner of his eye if she was coming this way. So long as Rayne didn't ask too many questions about what he was doing, Harry was safe!

That all depended on whether it was really Rayne or not, of course. Harry hadn't seen anyone so far, on a motorcycle or otherwise. It would be quite a laugh if the bike belonged to someone other than Rayne! Or worse, if it really was her, but she decided not to come this way at the last second. Harry realized he was behaving the exact same way he had with Cho Chang: nervous and clumsy! It was clear to him now that if he wanted to impress Rayne, he would have to play it much cooler than this. If the twins could have refrained from laughing, Harry might have sought out their advice. Then again, he mused, Harry couldn't remember feeling anywhere near like this with Cho! So, perhaps it was for the best.

Rayne pulled up alongside him a moment later, just in time for Harry to lower his head and pretend he hadn't seen her coming. She immediately pulled her helmet off and smiled his way. Harry raised up like he hadn't seen her there, and nodded.

"I need your help," she said without preamble. "Are you up for it?"

Harry wondered what she meant about that for a brief second, but pushed the thought aside when he realized his face was going red again.

"What do you need?"

"Not that it's something people generally forget, but do you remember those vampires that attacked us last night?"

He nodded. "I said that they might have been working under Valerius," she continued. "It seemed unlikely at the time, but I'd heard rumors that Val was working for someone higher up on the food chain. That may have been the whole reason he violated his probation with the Ministry! Probably figured this new face would protect him."

"And you want to go after the one who had him kill those wizard kids?" Harry finished.

"Not exactly. I try to stay out of vampire politics, but you got into trouble with the people you live with because they were after me. So,

I thought we could go find the vampires that tried to do me in, and teach them a lesson. Only problem is, I don't know where they are!"

"You need my help to find them?" Harry found that highly unlikely. Rayne didn't seem like she needed help from anyone, including himself!

"I know someone," she said, offering him the spare helmet. "He runs a shop on the other side of town. It wouldn't take us long to get there. This guy has his ears into everything that goes on in the darker parts of the magical community. We just need a legitimate reason for being there, is all."

"Come on!" she added, teasingly, when he didn't answer right away. "It should be simple, and you look like you could use a break for a little while. Plus, I know you want another ride on my bike."

There was a very suggestive way she said that, which helped Harry make up his mind. "Let me run inside and change first," he told her, dropping the rake.

Rayne waited patiently beside her bike while Harry ran upstairs. He quickly washed his face off with a wet towel and cleaned up, then got out of his dirty work clothes and threw them in a corner on top of the growing pile that desperately needed to be washed. Harry was dressed rather simply, choosing only a clean shirt and unworn pair of pants. He wasn't sure what Rayne had in mind, but all of his Muggle clothing had at some time been worn by his cousin. None of it really suited him, and that thought did not escape him as he checked his appearance in the mirror.

For a moment, Harry paused as he caught a really good look at himself. A skinny boy with dark hair in glasses stared back at him. Harry had never really liked the way he looked. His arms were far too boney, and he had always looked too thin from not being fed enough. He had gotten a lot taller in the past several years, plus he saw while turning to the side slightly that his arms weren't quite so thin as they had been. He was still thin, but there was a noticable meat to him, now that he could eat what he wanted. Harry decided that he might not look too bad, and the thought pleased him!

Noticing his hair, sticking up in all directions the way it always had, Harry remembered suddenly the night before, and how it'd stood straight up off his head after taking the helmet off. Dashing back to the washroom, Harry ran a wet comb through it a couple of times, hoping to mimic the effect. It didn't look quite right, but Rayne was waiting for him outside. His stomach had butterflies in it as he trotted down the stairs, trying not to sound too eager. Dudley was standing by the window looking outside as he reached the room. Harry saw him glance his way for a second, and he curiously peeked out first to see what had caught his cousin's attention.

Dudley, it turned out, was watching Rayne rather intently. A cheekish grin covered his face as he turned back to Dudley, and winked at him.

Rayne tossed Harry the helmet as he approached her. Climbing on back behind he, he fastened it tightly while she revved up the engine, and didn't have quite a good enough grip as they tore off down the road. Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around her waist, then almost let go once he realized what he'd done. Rayne made no move that she'd noticed one way or the other, so he tried to secure himself to keep from falling off.

It wasn't easy, though. Rayne drove her motorcycle the way he rode his broomstick in a Quidditch match against Slytherin. In and out of traffic they zoomed, heedless of the lights and warning signs that dotted the streets so clearly. People blew their horns at them as they rode past, but rather than feeling apologetic, Harry found he was enjoying himself. A couple of times, Rayne threw the bike into a higher gear, and rode the front wheel right off the street! Harry had to grab onto her waist when she did this again, but didn't let go when they came back down. Her skin was warm somehow against the chill wind that bit against his skin. Harry's arms felt like they were freezing as Rayne pulled up alongside a small shop in a rather seedy area of town. Harry thought about how the Dursleys would rant if they knew such a place even existed. It made him smile as they went through the doors.

It occurred to Harry that he had not idea what this shop even sold. The last time he'd entered such a place had nearly ended with him being

caught by the Malfoys, and then dragged out of Knockturn Alley by Hagrid. Rayne hadn't said what they were supposed to do here, other than ask for information. He was to keep people distracted, but she hadn't said how. Harry was beginning to feel just the slightest bit uncomfortable as he saw just what sort of place they were in.

It was a tattoo parlor!

There were pictures of different tattoos hanging all over every available space on the walls. A line of chairs that reminded Harry somehow of the ones seen at a barber were placed in a row inside a set of cubicles. There were all sorts of funny little instruments lying around, most of which looked more like they were designed for torture. There was also a distinct smell hanging in the air, like cleaner chemical, only worse. It made him a little nauseous.

Rayne, however, looked as though she felt right at home here. Calmly, as though she'd done this a thousand times before, she walked up to the counter and spoke quietly to the woman at the register. Harry was close enough that he could hear her, though.

"We came to see Nyu," she said. "Is he in right now?"

"Nyu only takes jobs from people who have cash up front," the woman replied, rather haughtily.

Rayne responded by dropping two solid gold galleons on the counter in front of her. The woman looked up for a moment like she wasn't happy to see them, but swept the wizarding money up in her hand and opened the register.

"You or him?" she asked, pointing between them. Rayne got a mischevious look in her eye as she glanced back at Harry, then nodded.

"Him!" she said, pointing.

The woman nodded and led them to a private room in the back. Harry had a sinking feeling he knew now why Rayne had brought him along. For a moment, he considered telling her no way, and walking back



out the door. Words froze in his throat as he saw the single figure standing in a corner, cleaning a strange tool with an impossibly white cloth. There was a greenish tint to his skin, at least what was visible around the vast number of tattoos on his arms, neck, and every other visible body part. Those parts seemed to be made of nothing but muscle; muscle and tattoos.

And there was a rather large horn sticking out from his forehead. It almost looked like a unicorn's, but curvy.

The woman simply pointed their direction as the creature looked up. Rayne gave him a little wave, and shook hands as he drew close. Harry caught sight of something that looked like Muggle money passing between their hands. He realized then what was about to happen, but it only made him feel the slightest bit better as he was instructed to sit in the chair in front of him.

"This is Nyu," she introduced, talking him by the hand. It felt hot against his cold skin, yet Rayne did it like it was totally natural. Harry gulped and nodded towards him, just to keep his mind off what was about to happen.

"Nyu is part East Asian troll," she explained as Nyu picked up a strange-looking gun. "He gets it from his mother's side. He pretty much runs things around here, but his work is amazing!"

"So why aren't you sitting in this chair?!" he hissed close to her ear.

Rayne shot him a look, but gave him a reassuring squeeze as she kept on talking. "Standard fee for any information that comes his way is two hundred pounds, plus one tattoo done strictly by him. Harry and I were wondering if you'd heard anything about a vampire named Valerius."

"Valerius?" Nyu spoke in a much higher voice than Harry would have thought. "He comes in here every other night or so. I usually let one of my apprentices handle him, since they're into vampires and such."

"He's history these days," Rayne informed him. "But we think he had a few others working for him."

"Valerius moved up in the last couple of years," Nyu replied, not looking at her. "It doesn't surprise me he got staked, since there was a price on his head for drinking those two wizards. A prize fit for any Euratt!"

Rayne tensed slightly, but didn't reply. It was Harry's turn to give her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"So, what were you looking for?" Nyu asked, crouching down beside him. "Most wizards your age now are trying to get me to copy the Dark Lord's mark. You don't seem like the type who would want something like that, though."

Harry blinked. "People are getting Voldemort's mark tattooed on them?!"

If Nyu was surprised at Harry using Voldemort's real name, as supposed to saying You-Know-Who like everyone else, it didn't show in his face. Harry realized his scar was in plain sight from the angle where Nyu sat, yet he hadn't reacted to it. Nyu just blinked at him and smiled.

"Sure! Kids think it'll make them seem cooler to all their friends. Either that, or they're hoping Death Eaters will mistake it for the real thing and pass them by! Stupid, really, but I just do what I'm paid for."

Harry agreed, at least with the stupid part. "So," Nyu pressed. "What's it going to be?"

Harry tried to think of something. "How about..." he paused. "Can you do a Hungarian Horntail?"

Nyu was silent for a brief second. "Absolutely! Which part?"

"What?"

"He means, which part of your body do you want the tattoo on," Rayne told him, softly.

"My... shoulder?"

He didn't want one in a place where people could see it easily. Actually, Harry hadn't wanted one at all, but now that they were here, it seemed like he was going to go through with it after all! He wasn't sure what had made him think of the dragon he'd fought against at the Triwizard Tournament. It'd just popped in his head, unbidden.

"Shirt," Nyu said simply, gesturing for Harry to remove his, and began rubbing some sort of cold gel over Harry's right shoulder blade once he'd pulled it off. Rayne held onto his hand the whole time, and placed her other reassuringly on the other as Nyu went to work.

It stung something terrible! Harry felt like his entire backside was under assault by a swarm of angry hornets! His teeth clenched in pain as he darted his eyes around the room for something, anything, that would distract from what was happening. Why in the world would anybody subject themselves to this kind of torture!?

He could suddenly feel the weight of Rayne's hand in his. She gripped his other shoulder firmly, and suddenly nuzzled his cheek. Harry turned slightly to meet her eyes, his own widening in shock. The fire in his back was abruptly gone. He could breathe clearly now. Even the smell of the room was gone, and it was just the two of them. Nyu's presence had evaporated.

"Done!" Nyu declared, loudly.

Harry jerked at the unexpected sound of his voice. "What?! You're done already?"

"We've been at it for an hour, stud!" he said in a knowing voice. "Don't worry, though. It works like that for some people."

Harry took a deep breath as some of the pain came back all at once. Rayne hadn't let go of his hand, and he gave it a comforting squeeze while looking around the room. He noticed then a leather jacket that looked like it was made from dragon hide. It was jet black, and had a griffon stenciled on back in gold.

"Worn by Rodderick Griffinson," Nyu said, pointing at where he stared. "Said to be a descendant of Godric Gryffindor himself! Now, with Muggles, we tend to let the tattoo heal up on it's own. Usually takes about a week or two, depending on the person. If a wizard gets one, however, we offer to heal it automatically, so it's your choice."

"Heal it, please!" Harry said earnestly.

Nyn nodded and pulled out a small potion bottle with a purple froth coming out the top. He quickly dabbed a couple of drops onto the place where Harry's shoulder still burned, then blew across it. It felt like the froth was spreading across the area, then the pain vanished.

"Done, and done!" Nyu declared. "Good as new. Anything else you need?"

"Just... one question."

"Okay?"

"How is it that Muggles come in here and don't ask about your horn?"

Nyu laughed at that, and Harry could hear Rayne snickering off to the side. "People have wondered that before," Nyu told him, between snorts. "But no one's ever had the brass to ask me directly. You've got stones, you know that?! The truth is, most Muggles just assume it's all part of some gimmick. You know how they are!"

Harry looked down. "Actually, I do."

"The one's that don't are always too frightened to find out, so no one suspects anything. I'm just a kook to them that has a gimmick to go along with his business, and nothing more! But, it draws people in here."

Harry waited while Rayne said goodbye to Nyu. He noticed the two of them whispering for a moment, but it was too noisy in the main part of the shop for him to hear well. Several people had come in while they were in the back, and a wireless was blasting a song that sounded suspiciously like something by the Weird Sisters. When Rayne

emerged, she was carrying a small bag in her hands, and motioned for Harry to follow her.

"Sorry about that," she said, sincerely. "I would have gotten it myself, but the truth is, I have a rare blood condition."

"So, you can't have tattoos done on yourself?" he asked, as they exited the store.

"I can, but only once in a very long time. I know a spell that can get rid of the one you got, if you'd like. It'll hurt like a... Well, it hurts pretty bad, but it'll come off."

Harry touched the place where his tattoo was now. "Actually," he said. "I think I might leave it on for a little while, if that's okay?"

"Yosh!" Rayne said, grinning. "Oh, and I got you this!"

Rayne handed Harry the package she'd been holding. Inside was the jacket he'd seen hanging on the wall! The griffon on back shined brightly now that they were outdoors. "I caught you eyeing it a few minutes ago," she explained. "Your arms were freezing earlier, so I thought this would help keep you warm. I hope you don't mind!"

"It's... amazing!" Harry stammered, grinning from ear to ear.

Rayne nodded appreciatively as Harry slipped into it. "Not bad! You look great in it."

"Thanks!" he replied, smiling.

"I know where the vampires are, too. Nyu filled me in after you left the room. He has this whole privacy issue, not allowing more than one person in a room with him while he's giving out information on somebody." Harry just nodded and climbed on back of the bike.

"So, I guess you don't need me anymore, huh?"

Rayne glanced back at him before revving the engine. "You could come along, if you'd like. I promise to not get in the way!"

Harry blinked. "I didn't think..."

"I know," she said, quickly. "I was kidding. But seriously, you could come along. It might even be fun!"

Harry looked away when she said that. "It might be dangerous," he said softly. "Something bad could happen."

Rayne responded by taking hold of his hands and wrapping them around her waist. "Nothing bad can happen to me," she said warmly. "You're here to protect me!"

Harry didn't have a choice but to keep his grip on her as Rayne tore off down the road into a phalanx of oncoming cars! He wondered as Rayne wove her way through them with expert precision whether she really needed saving or not! He, on the other hand, was currently reliving several flashbacks from the time Ron and Hermione had conspired with him to make Polyjuice Potion and sneak into the Slytherin common room. Harry wondered now if he'd ever see them again.

Rayne seemed to know exactly what she was doing, though. Gradually, he loosened his grip on her waist, but but didn't let go of her. The jacket was doing a great job of keeping him warm. The leather even felt good against his skin. Harry didn't jump quite so bad as they rounded a curve, and blasted off for another part of town. Something rose up in his throat, but it didn't taste like bile. With a jolt, he realized he was enjoying himself again! This really was not so different from riding a broomstick, except that they were closer to the ground. As they rounded another curve, the lump burst free out of his mouth, and Harry gave a whoop of pure joy. Rayne pumped a fist in the air in response, making him laugh.

It felt as though he hadn't laughed in forever.

## Chapter 5

### The Accusation of Arabella Figg

by Ri-kun

Harry was looking up at a brightly-lit sign hanging above what looked to be some kind of a pub. This place, he read, was called The Broken Anthem. Music of a sort was coming through the doors as they opened for people. A large man who for all rights appeared human, but looked impossibly large, was checking something in people's hands before letting them through. Harry noticed the one's he turned away were about his age.

Rayne seemed to catch on with his thinking, and flicked a wand out. "Hold out your hand," she instructed.

Harry complied, and watched as she attempted to hide what they were doing. Satisfied the bike could shield them both, she waved the tip over his extended palm. A soft glow emitted from it, and suddenly Harry was holding a small card in his hand. A card that placed him at roughly eighteen years of age, and with what looked like a goatee. Rayne grinned widely at him, and put her wand up.

"Just a nifty trick to help us get inside," she told him. "I've seen other people do a better job of it, but it should work."

"Why am I not wearing glasses?" he wondered, getting in line ahead of her.

"That's easy!" Rayne said, giving his neck a squeeze. "I'm the one who's driving."

Together, they waited as the line thinned down. Most people were getting in without a problem, but he saw a few more being turned away the closer they got to the door. Rayne didn't seem terribly concerned, though, so Harry tried his best to remain calm, and simply handed the forged document over to the guard when he asked for it. The guard eyed him for a second, then looked past at Rayne. He shifted on his feet, but gave the card back to Harry and opened the

door for both of them. Rayne and he shared a conspiratorial grin with one other as the noise inside the place washed over them.

It was extremely crowded.

There were more people crammed into this one small area than the Great Hall! Harry kept a grip on Rayne as they pushed their way through the mass of people together. This looked like a place for wizards, but Harry thought he recognized a handful of Muggles sitting over in a corner at one point. Rayne led him over to the counter where a bartender was pouring shots for a group of what looked like hags. The creatures were cackling at the tops of their lungs the whole time they poured drinks down their throats. Harry sat down near them with Rayne on his left, but kept a close watch as she motioned the bartender over.

"You're such a sweet little thing!"

Harry glanced over where one of the hags was sitting. A rather long tongue licked out and traced her lower lip as she stared longingly. Harry just ignored her and tried to keep himself aware of his surroundings. The place was beginning to give off a bad vibe to him.

"What?" the hag continued. "Don't want to talk to me? I'd love to talk with you, pretty!"

A blast flew past him and hit the hag right in the chest. She gave out a shriek once before falling right off the stool to the floor in a heap. Harry whirled around to see where the spell had come from, but it was Rayne who had her wand out, still pointed at the hag.

"Hands off, ladies!" she threatened, glaring at the others, who hissed menacingly. "He's with me tonight!"

Rayne smiled his way as their drinks arrived, but Harry could only shake his head and wonder. Rayne had ordered him a Butterbeer, which tasted fairly well against his parched throat, though nowhere near as good as Rosmerta's at the Three Broomsticks. The vibe he'd picked up diminished slightly as the liquid settled in stomach. Harry realized he was hungry, and hadn't eaten since early that morning.



"Hungry?" Rayne offered.

"How'd you know?"

"Just a lucky guess," she replied with a wink. "Wings and chips alright with you?"

Harry nodded, and was soon plunging into a large plate of steaming chicken wings that'd been smothered in a spicy red sauce. The food was surprisingly good, especially as the Butterbeer was making him a little too warm.

"Sorry if I overstepped back there with the hags," Rayne said after a moment. "I just didn't want them clawing all over you."

"I would have been okay," Harry said, wondering privately if that were true.

"I never thought you wouldn't have! I just didn't feel like sharing you with anyone else. Tonight, you're my date!"

Harry nearly choked at hearing that. Did Rayne really think this was supposed to be a date? Harry was still in school, and she looked to have been out of Durmstrang for at least a couple of years! Besides that, they were supposed to have come here looking for vampires. Harry was beginning to wonder what had possessed him to come in the first place. He was supposed to be laying low at Privet Drive. Voldemort was on the rise, and he was playing hero again. Hadn't Harry learned his lesson by now! This was the very sort of thing that Hermione had warned him about.

Harry felt ashamed of himself, then. He was underage and in a bar drinking with someone he barely knew anything at all about. This was the sort of thing Fred and George would have joked about. Harry didn't have the luxury of being normal, though. He was beginning to suspect he never had, and the last several years at Hogwarts was just him attempting to delude himself into believing otherwise!

Getting to his feet, he slipped into the crowd. It was hard to figure out which way he was going, with so many moving bodies blocking his path. At first, Harry thought he'd found the door, but upon stumbling through them, he found he was standing in some sort of alley. It had grown dark, but there was still enough light to see by. No one else was here, as far as Harry could see, yet he had the distinct feeling that somebody was watching him!

From somewhere.

A noise was coming from down near the mouth of the alley. Harry drew his wand and waited, but nothing happened. Over and over again, he heard it. Like something was hitting the dirt and whooshing up through the air. After a moment, a small figure appeared not far away through the shadows. Harry squinted to see, and realized it was a small girl playing with a ball. With a jolt, he realized it was the exact same girl he'd found in the park a few nights ago.

Curious, he lowered his wand so she wouldn't see, and stepped forward. The girl waved upon seeing him, which caused her ball to fall to the ground and roll near his feet. Harry reached down to pick it up, but she quickly called out, "Don't!"

Looking up, he found she was just a few short feet away. Harry hadn't heard her footsteps along the ground, which seemed a little unusual. The girl just calmly picked her ball up and smiled at him.

"I've got it," she said cheerily. "Thank you, though."

"You're welcome," he replied, wondering what she was doing here. "Are you lost again?"

The girl giggled as if he'd said something incredibly funny. "No, silly! I came here by myself this time."

"It's probably not very safe for you here. Are you with your mom?"

"My mom died, remember? I told you!"

"Right!" Harry said, feeling very insensitive. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have forgotten something like that."

"People forget about things all the time. It's okay."

Harry blinked at her. It seemed like such a strange thing to hear from someone barely over ten. "Why are you out here alone, then?" he pressed.

"I came to see you."

"Me?"

"Yes, I knew you would be here. I wanted to say thanks for helping me the other night. Those vampires might have killed me if you hadn't saved me from them!"

"I really didn't do anything," he admitted. "You ran off before I realized it, and Rayne..." Harry stopped. "Wait... how did you know there were vampires?"

The girl was gone, though. Harry looked back down to find she'd completely disappeared on him! His eyes made a quick sweep of the whole alley, but couldn't catch even a glimpse of her. It was getting darker, though, so she could have been hiding somewhere. Harry was considering looking through the piles of trash when a hand grabbed him. His wand was out and at the ready before he realized it. Rayne stared blankly at him for a second, then backed away.

"Sorry," she said, sounded a little hurt. "I guess you just needed to be alone."

Harry wanted to curse himself. "No," he said softly, putting his wand up. "I... just needed to get out of there."

"Right. It was getting a bit crowded!"

"Did you," he blurted out. "Did you see a little girl here a second ago?"

Rayne looked at him. "No, should I have?"

"I was talking to this girl. She looked about ten years old, but then she disappeared. I think she was in the park the night I met you!"

Rayne's eyes narrowed in the dim light. "Odd, that."

"True," Harry agreed. "So, are we staying here, or..."

Rayne flicked both wands out suddenly, and aimed just to the right of his head. Harry barely had time to move out of the way before a silver light erupted, and something white and sharp flew past him to pierce the heart of the vampire at his back. The vampire let out a howl of pain before crumbling to dust on the ground.

"There are more of them!" she warned.

Harry gathered his wits and armed himself as more came stumbling from the woodwork. They looked to be the same vampires that attacked him and Rayne on the Dursley's front lawn. One made for Harry straight off, but he quickly knocked it to the side with a stunning spell. Another seemed to hesitate a second before bearing its fangs. Harry wished he had paid more attention on how to properly ward away these guys. There were quite a few of them, and Rayne looked surrounded.

He paid for his distraction a second later as the vampire seized him by the arms and moved forward for the kill. As Harry felt the rancid breath against the pulse in his throat, he suddenly recalled the spell Rayne had used in the other alley. It was one Harry had never heard of before, but seeing as he didn't have much choice!

"Combustus Inflamera!"

There hadn't been enough time for him to aim his wand properly. Harry was, at the very least, grateful he hadn't been pointing it at himself. A large hole had appeared directly over where the vampire's heart had been. The creature staggered back a couple of steps as the smoking area continued to spread. Fire erupted all over his body, and the monster died before drawing the breath needed to scream.

Rayne, meanwhile, was going toe to toe with three vampires at once. In-between blows, she fired off a spell that either set the monsters ablaze, or threw them back several feet. He couldn't hear what incantations she was using, which meant that Rayne was once more relying on non-verbal magic. Harry would have liked to learn how she did it, but now wasn't the time to request lessons. He found watching her was rather titillating.

Rayne finished off the last vampire with a flourish. Harry was struck by how alive she seemed, especially when her eyes turned to meet his. He let out a slow breath that formed steam unnaturally in the summer night. A cold chill was creeping up his back, now. Harry turned slowly around to face the mouth of the alley, knowing what was there before he looked.

The dark and ragged cloak of a dementor swished against the ground, making a sound like dry leaves scrapping across concrete. The creature drifted just above the ground as it came towards them both, its arms held up slightly as if considering them. Harry raised his wand without thinking, and cried out at once.

"Expecto Patronum!"

To his shock, nothing happened at first. Harry blinked and gave his wand a quick shake, hoping that would be enough. The dementor was being joined by several others, strengthening the cold air that pressed inward down to their bones. His head was swimming as he and Rayne backed up slightly. Rayne raised both her wands at once, but only a few empty wisps of silver came puffing out of it. Clearly, a Patronus was beyond her at this point. Harry's mind had already begun to swim with the memories of Cedric Diggory's body falling to the ground in the graveyard, of Voldemort cackling over him in the Department of Mysteries, and of seeing Sirius fall through the black veil...

The memory of his godfather came to him at once. He saw as clearly as if Sirius had returned to him from the grave, laughing slightly over Christmas dinner with the rest of the Order, smiling at Harry as they'd said goodbye before he rode away on Buckbeak...

Sirius wouldn't have given up, even if it looked as hopeless as right now.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he screamed, loud and clear.

Something large and silvery, something that did not have antlers atop its head and most definitely did not look like a stag came roaring out of the tip of his wand. Harry didn't have time to register what it was, though the beast was clearly massive and furry. The Patronus charged down all three dementors at once, scattering them. The Patronus then turned towards Harry and bound back in a very familiar trot. He looked on in confusion as the canine, as big and frightful as any picture of a Grim, gave him a friendly lick once before disappearing from sight. The place where its tongue had brushed against the skin felt warm, even though he shouldn't have felt anything at all.

"Chikusho!" Rayne swore. "It had to be dementors. The Patronus spell was never a specialty of mine, which is why I always tried to avoid them if I could. Nice job conjuring up that thing! I've never seen one that looked..."

"It was him," Harry whispered, really to himself.

Rayne waited for a moment, but Harry said nothing else. "Nani?" she finally asked. "Who?"

"Nothing!" he responded, not meeting her face.

"Fine," was all Rayne would say. There was a weighted silence to the air now that the dementors had gone. Harry wanted desperately to tell her, but the words never would come. Plus, Rayne might hate him for it, though not nearly as much as Harry hated himself. Sirius would never have gone to the Department of Mysteries if he'd stayed behind.

Something moved behind them, and each turned at the exact same time. Rayne had her wand out first, but it was Harry who said the spell before her. The vampire that lunged down from somewhere on high was hit in the chest with a blast of sunlight straight in the chest.

In seconds, there was a hole burnt all the way through him. This vampire had just enough time to scream, before his body was dust. Harry had already lowered his wand before the thought occurred to him that he hadn't uttered the incantation aloud. He'd known about non-verbal magic for quite a while. Rayne had done it in front of him.

Still...

The ride back to Privet Drive was subdued. Rayne said nothing to him as she pulled her bike up alongside the front lawn of the Dursley house. Harry pulled the helmet off and handed it over to her in silence, then paused. It felt wrong, very wrong, to leave things like this. Not sure of what to say, he stood there for a moment, wondering how to say it.

"My godfather died..." he blurted out. "A month ago, or so."

Rayne looked at him in surprise. "He was my Patronus," Harry went on. "It never looked that way before. It was always a stag, because my father... he could turn into one. He was an unregistered Animagus, and my Patronus looked like him, at least until today."

"Sometimes," Rayne spoke softly. "When a witch or wizard has undergone a great ordeal of some kind, their Patronus will change its shape accordingly to fit them."

"Especially," she added. "If it dealt with someone they knew and loved."

Harry looked down, suddenly very interested in the grass under his feet. "My parents were killed when I was a year old. It's how I wound up here at the Dursleys in the first place. I really don't remember them at all, but it used to be that, when the dementors came around me, I would hear the last things they said... the night they died."

"In my third year, I found out I had a godfather. He'd been sent to Azkaban for a crime he didn't commit, and escaped to go after the real killer. A friend of mine and I proved he didn't do it, but he still had to escape again. We didn't really..." Harry stopped, and swallowed down the lump in his throat. It felt important now that he finish.

"We didn't see each other much. Then, about a month ago, I had... Someone sent me a message, saying he was in trouble. It was really a trap, and when I got there, he showed up to save me."

"And then, he died." Rayne wasn't asking a question, but Harry nodded woefully.

"I felt like such an idiot afterwards! Dumbledore, the headmaster, said that Sirius would've..."

Harry had to stop. The lump that was rising up in his throat made it impossible to talk. Rayne climbed off her bike and hung the helmet against the handlebar. She then seized Harry by the shoulders, and raised him to meet her eyes.

"People die," she spoke, sounding very grave. "Everyone does at some point or another. It sounds to me like your godfather came to rescue you because he loved you. Some people will never understand what it's like to be loved for that way. Some people will never, ever, have a person who's willing to rescue them. He died, but at least it was on his own terms. I don't think that should make you feel better, but maybe you should accept the fact that your godfather loved you."

Harry's forehead wrinkled. "What do you mean?"

"Your Patronus," she said, smiling. "Do you really think it changed its shape by accident? I think that was his way of trying to tell you to live your life. It's what he was doing, when he came to save you. You'd have done the same for him!"

Harry thought for a moment. "You did do the same for him," she added, pointedly. "You loved him, and when he might have been in trouble, you came to his rescue. That's something I really could never understand, but I believe it's true. Harry, your godfather would want you to keep on living, even if it meant he couldn't be with you."

The lump was still there, but Rayne's voice made it soften enough to where he could speak around it. Harry wished he could just vanish it



away with a spell; having Rayne see him this way made him burn red with embarrassment. She would surely laugh later at how silly he was being. Her face, for the moment, however, showed nothing but concern.

"In the alley," he began. "I kept thinking over and over again that I was going to get somebody hurt! I kept thinking that, you might get hurt, and then it would be all my fault. Just like when Sirius died!"

"You didn't kill Sirius," she said, firmly. "And we were in the alley for a reason! Besides, the world isn't a safe place, Harry. No matter where you go, or what languages you speak, the danger is always going to be there. Either you're prepared for it, or you aren't." Something clicked in her eyes, then.

"Someone really did a number on you, didn't they?" she said, running her fingers through his hair. "Who made you feel like this was all your fault?"

Before Harry could think about her question, a shrill cry came roaring up from the other side of the street. Harry and Rayne had their wands out, ready for attack at once. It didn't sound like any kind of noise Harry had ever heard coming from a vampire, but his knowledge of them was still limited. The look on Rayne's face suggested she too was confused. In a second, they both saw a haggard-looking woman march across the road to where they stood, holding a bag filled to the brim with cat food, and looking angry enough to beat them both over the heads with it!

"I knew it!" Miss Figg cried out, swigging her bag around in a circle. "I knew it! I knew you had to be behind all of this!"

Harry wondered what she was talking about. Miss Figg and he might not have been on the best of terms, but he'd only learned a year ago that she was a Squib; a witch born without any magical skill. Miss Figg had been placed by Dumbledore to keep watch over Harry in the years before he entered Hogwarts, though at the moment, she looked more ready to finish him off. Mr. Tibbles, one of her many cats, was following close behind, watching her with a wary eye.

"I knew it!" she spat, coming right up to Rayne's face. Harry looked on in surprise as Rayne lost all expression, and returned the stare with a look of utter neutrality.

"Somehow, I just knew you'd be responsible for all of this!" Miss Figg said, glowering at her. "And you!"

Her glaze then centered on him. Harry just stared back at her, not sure of what else to do. "I thought you of all people would have better sense than this," she hissed. "Don't you realize what's going on around us, boy!? Dumbledore had the whole Order looking for you! We thought maybe your mother's charm had broken somehow, and You-Know-Who came to spirit you away!"

"Running off like that!" Figg went on, letting her back drop limply to her side. "Running away when the entire Wizarding world is watching you. Dumbledore has his hands full with enough already; he doesn't need to keep running to the Ministry to smooth over your blatant use of magic ever five minutes. Don't you remember what happened last time, boy?!"

"And you, of all people!" she rounded on Rayne. "My biggest regret is that I didn't report you to Albus when I had the chance! All your snooping around last summer, showing up at the strangest times whenever he was in sight." Miss Figg was pointing an accusing finger at Harry now, but continued to glower at Rayne.

"Always hanging around in the background, thinking I didn't notice! I almost wrote to Dumbledore straightaway to tell him about you, but then you were gone! I shouldn't have changed my mind, then. So, now you're back, and dragging him off into who knows what sort of trouble. It's amazing that the Daily Prophet didn't report you as kidnapped!"

Harry felt like he was missing something important. A sick feeling had formed in the pit of his stomach. Rayne had said nothing in response to Miss Figg's accusations, but somehow it didn't make him feel better.

"You!" Miss Figg barked, looking over at him now. "Get inside and up to your room at once. And grant us all a huge favor by staying there for a change! Dumbledore will need to know that you're unharmed. As soon as I'm done with her, I'll send word at once."

Harry remained right where he was until Rayne nodded in his direction. Knowing she wanted him to leave didn't make him feel better about walking back into the Dursley house. His Aunt Petunia had been listening by the window the entire time. Rather than looking smug at him as he headed upstairs, she appeared rather pale. Uncle Vernon was standing not far away, looking as though he wanted nothing more than to chuck the expensive vase Aunt Marge had sent them right between his eyes. They both watched him go without saying a word. As he moved out of sight, Harry thought he saw a glimmer of concern in his aunt's face.

She had turned away before he could see her clearly, and ran through the doors to the kitchen. Harry decided he must have been imagining things, and headed up for his room. Thankfully, Dudley was shut up in his own, playing music at an obscene level that would have surely gotten him in trouble had he attempted it. Harry hung back against the wall, watching the street from his vantage point at the window, where Miss Figg continued to grill Rayne.

Rayne had mounted her motorcycle, and was gunning the engine as Miss Figg began waving her arms around wildly. Whatever she'd been telling Rayne was lost to the roar of the bike, however. Rayne tore off down the road with Miss Figg screaming after her. Harry moved out of the way of the window before she caught sight of him watching. He thought for a second she might have seen him anyway, but then Figg turned and walked away towards her house.

Harry spent the next several hours thinking over what Miss Figg had told him. Dumbledore had sent the Order out looking for him, which meant the Weasleys probably knew at this point that he'd gone out. Mrs. Weasley would be having a fit, and Ron would be caught between wondering whether Harry was alright, and put out that he hadn't been included in on the fun. Thinking back, Harry remembered the tattoo he'd gotten. Rayne could still remove it, but Harry was

growing used to the idea of leaving it there. It wasn't like the Hungarian Horntail was visible; his clothes pretty much covered it up.

To be sure, Harry checked himself in the mirror, and was satisfied to see that the dragon lay far enough down on his shoulder blade that no one would notice. Harry didn't have any plans to show it to people. Well, perhaps Ron, whenever Harry was finally allowed to leave Privet Drive. The Weasley twins were sure to get a kick out of it! Harry at last had gotten one step ahead of them! Briefly, he even entertained himself with wondering what Ginny would say...

There was a rustling at the window. Harry smiled, unable to help himself, and opened it up so he could look around. Sure enough, Rayne was perched rather dangerously on the edge just off to his left, waiting for all the world like this was nothing unusual.

"Come in!" Harry told her, getting out of the way so she could climb through.

"You should be careful," she warned, smiling nonetheless. "I could have been a Dark wizard trying to make a name by offing you!"

"I knew it was you," he said, grinning ear to ear.

"Nice neighbor you've got there," Rayne commented, settling on the floor. "Has she always been that protective?"

"It's a long story." Harry was finding it difficult to make conversation with her so close. Now that Rayne was inside, he was reminded vividly of what had happened between them in his dreams. Thinking about it caused the temperature in the room to rise up considerably. Harry tried with all his might to avoid looking at his bed, yet the piece of furniture suddenly had an inexplicable appeal for him.

"What was she talking about?" he asked, hoping for a distraction.

Rayne stiffened, and turned around slowly to meet him face-on. "I... haven't been totally honest with you," she admitted. "There are a lot of things about you I knew... before we met."

Harry just shrugged. "That's not strange." Hermione had known more about him in their first year, after all.

"I was... hired by someone, Harry. Euratts learn to take jobs and not ask questions. I thought this wouldn't be different than anything else I'd done, and believe me, I've done some things that I'm not..." Rayne paused, and swallowed.

"I thought this would be simple. All somebody wanted me to do was find Lord Voldemort!"

Harry was surprised, more by Rayne's usage of the Dark Lord's real name than anything else. The only other person who generally said Voldemort instead of You-Know-Who was Dumbledore.

"Who hired you?" Harry wondered.

Rayne shook her head. "Wakarimasen. I don't know! Whoever did it contacted me through a source, and relayed the instructions and payment that way. It might sound strange to you, but this is how a lot of my jobs come to me. Most people in the wizarding world don't want anyone to know they're associating with a Euratt. It can be bad for someone's reputation."

"Like werewolves," Harry muttered. "Or half-giants!"

Rayne looked at him. "Hai," she said. "Anyway, I was hired to keep an eye on you last year. The person who paid me had heard a rumor that Lord Voldemort had come back, and was building his power base again. I think they wanted to know if the rumor was true. The Ministry of Magic here was doing their best to convince everyone that it wasn't true, if you recalled."

Harry recalled all too well. The scars on his right hand where Doloris Umbridge had made him write in his own blood began to itch involuntarily, and Harry resisted the urge to tear at them. Instead, he looked up in Rayne's face and nodded.

"I was told that following you was my best lead," she went on. "You were the only real link to Lord Voldemort, so I camped out on Privet

Drive and watched you from a distance. Arabella Figg spotted me a couple of times. I think she began to suspect what I was there for, although I was never intending to hurt you."

"I guessed as much," Harry interrupted, grinning. "You've had plenty of chances to do that already!"

"True," she admitted, returning the smile. "Or, better yet, I could have just thrown you to the bloodsuckers! That would've messed up your pretty face, though. A lot of your rougher vampires like to play with their food before they eat it."

Harry gave a shudder. It was the strangest compliment he'd ever received, yet he couldn't help but feel flattered.

"One night, a year ago, you just disappeared. I must've somehow missed you when they came to take you away! It really bothered me that somebody could move you without me noticing. How did they managed that, if I may ask?"

"Disillusionment Charm," Harry explained. "Some members of the..." Harry stopped. "Some people that work for Professor Dumbledore came and picked me up. They had to do it after dark, since the Ministry was watching the Dursley house, looking for an excuse to expel me."

"Sounds a lot like them. So, I missed your big move that night because of a Disillusionment Charm? I must be losing my touch!"

Harry wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he said nothing. "I watched you fight off those dementors last year," Rayne added, approvingly. "You managed your Patronus before I could get close enough to hex them away. I was impressed!"

Harry shook his head. "It was really nothing. I learned how to do a Patronus in my third year. Hogwarts had dementors from Azkaban set around the school. It's a really long story," he added, when Rayne looked at him incredulously. "I almost didn't make it that night. They caught me by surprise."

"A Patronus is no small feat, Harry!" Rayne declared. "Most wizards can't manage one, especially under the strain of a dementor attack. You have to be a really powerful wizard to be able to do something like that."

Harry grinned, in spite of feeling humbled. "You're really amazing," he told her. "I've never seen anyone use magic the way you do. How did you learn that?"

"Just practice, I guess," she shrugged, looking out the window. "That, and putting myself in danger on a daily basis. I suppose that would help!"

Both he and Rayne laughed, knowing exactly what she meant. Before long, they were joking with one another like they'd been friends for years. Harry felt a deep lurch of sadness when she finally told him it was time for her to go.

"Could..." Harry began, as she climbed out the window. "Could you... maybe, come back tomorrow?"

Rayne looked back at him. "What for?"

"I..." The lump that had haunted his throat came back, but for an entirely different reason now. "Just to... talk."

Rayne stared at Harry in surprise. "Even after what Miss Figg said about me?" she pressed. "You know, everything she said was true. I really was paid to spy on you. Most wizards would have hexed me on the spot!"

Harry mulled that one over for a moment. "I guess I'm not like most wizards, then."

Rayne nodded, her eyes filling with some deep emotion he couldn't explain. "No," she whispered. "You aren't, Harry Potter."

Rayne climbed down the side of the house with ease, as if she were born with all the skill of a cat. Harry watched her go, wishing the night didn't have to end. He'd never once had a friend over at Privet Drive.

The Dursleys had forbidden it, and Dudley had made certain that no one in the Muggle world would want to come near him. Rayne didn't seem like the type to be intimidated by the Dursleys, though. He was finding that he enjoyed her company immensely.

"Until tomorrow night," she said, blowing him a kiss.

Harry felt himself grow warm, but waved goodbye. He was very glad that it was too dark and misty now for Rayne to see him clearly. His eyes never once left her as she strode purposely over to her bike and rode away. The sound of it echoed through the air through his window long after she'd drive off. Harry didn't sleep at all, and only managed to get a few hours of sleep by taking a nap mid-afternoon. Before Rayne showed up again, he took the time to clean himself up a bit, and even managed to comb his hair. He waited by the window for her long after the sun had gone down, listening for some sign of her. When the distinct tone of her motorcycle came roaring down in the distance, he found he was grinning uncontrollably.



## Chapter 6

### The Underground

by Ri-kun

The next week at Privet Drive saw a drastic change in Harry's attitude towards the place. Before Rayne became a nightly visitor, Harry had spent each summer dreading his return to the Dursley house, and checking each day that passed with an impatient fever. He would have never believed that the smallest bedroom upstairs, the one Uncle Vernon had taken from Dudley only out of fear after Harry first received his Hogwarts letter, could begin to feel at home with him.

True to her word, Rayne had come back the following night, and spent hours up in Harry's room talking with him. It felt amazing to have a friend that was connected with the magical world, yet was so close to the Dursleys. It took Harry no time at all to count on her visits. The two spent each night willing the hours away, sharing stories with one another. Rayne seemed shocked at first that the famous Harry Potter was interested in his life. She mostly told him of her life as a Euratt, and some of the more exotic places her travels had taken her. Harry listened with rapt attention as she told him of one particular time when she'd been hired to track down a warlock that'd been using Inferi, an corpse animated with Dark magic, to kidnap young witches to be his bride.

"The trick with Inferi is to use fire," she'd explained, drawing one wand out. "All undead forms are vulnerable to it, in varying strengths. So, I was surrounded by Inferi, and this loon keeps trying to convince me that I would be a perfect bride for him. I wound up having to blast the entire house apart just to get the maniac to shut up!"

Harry laughed for several minutes. "I take it you told him no," he ribbed, snickering.

Rayne glared, but was smiling the whole time. "I would've made a terrible bride," she informed him. "For one thing, I refuse to do dishes!"

Rayne turned out to be just as interested in Harry, which he found bewildering. When Rayne pressed, he sheepishly told her of the time in his first year about going down the trap door that was guarded by Fluffy to retrieve the Sorcerer's Stone.

"You... touched the Sorcerer's Stone," Rayne had said, very slowly. "You actually held it in your hands?"

Harry nodded, feeling foolish. "The stone had been hidden in something called the Mirror of Erised. Only someone that wanted to find the stone, but not use it, could get it out. I was forced to stand in front of it, and the stone just sort of... appeared in my pocket."

"Unbelievable!" Rayne had looked entranced when she said it. "Do you have any idea how many wizards there are around the world that would love to just put their hands on it for just a few seconds?! Harry, that's amazing!"

"Well, the stone is destroyed, now," he admitted. "Professor Dumbledore told me that Nicolas Flammel had enough Elixir to put everything in order before he died."

"Sou, I'd heard a rumor..."

Rayne actually balked when he recalled the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. According to her, she'd been out of the country at the time, and hadn't heard about it being reformed until it was over. Being from Durmstrang, she of course knew all about it.

"They had me facing this Hungarian Horntail," he told her, remembering how big the dragon was with a twitch that raced along his tattoo. "I was staring straight up at it, with it breathing fire down at me. I'd only managed to get the spell right the night before, and still wasn't sure it would work. But my Firebolt came roaring out towards me like it was supposed to, and I jumped on. After that, it was like all my fear just melted away! I was the fastest one to get the golden egg," he added, knowing he was just bragging for her sake.

Rayne was impressed, both by the story and the fact that he owned a Firebolt broom. Though she preferred her motorcycle for travel,

Rayne had been an accomplished flyer for some years now. Her grueling schedule at Durmstrang, she explained, had prevented her from joining any Quidditch teams. Feeling a bit smug, Harry had pulled his broomstick out just so Rayne could examine it for herself. After many minutes of awed silence, she finally raised up with a smile and proclaimed it the finest she'd ever seen.

Harry was truly grateful for her company. After the encounter with Miss Figg in the street, Dumbledore had written Harry by means of one of the tawny owls used by Hogwarts, asking that he not leave the Dursley house again. This letter had irked him somehow, even though he knew that the headmaster meant well. He'd kept to his room when he wasn't working out in the yard, partially out of guilt for the tantrum he'd thrown in the headmaster's office. The lawn had been suffering a bit due to his late nights, but Harry was sure the Dursleys weren't about to complain. Hopefully soon, someone would be by to take him to the Burrow, where he could spend the rest of the summer with the Weasleys.

Strangely, Harry wasn't looking forward to seeing the Burrow as much. Life on Privet Drive was still at its predictable low point, but Harry felt that he might lose Rayne's friendship if he were to disappear again. The Order would most likely have him taken away by night again, or through some other magical transportation that had numerous security set around it. Rayne had never discussed where she lived, or how long she even planned to stay in Little Whinging. If he were to leave, there was a chance he might never see her again.

This preturbed Harry greatly. He'd come to rely on Rayne as a friend and confidant. Hedwig, for the most part, was nice to have around, but it wasn't the same. She hadn't seemed thrilled by the presence of Rayne in his room at first, but now was content to go hunting at night without clipping Rayne with her wing as she left. Harry had apologized the first time it happened, but Rayne seemed to find Hedwig's jealousy amusing.

One day, Harry was up in his room, trying to will nightfall to come faster. He'd just finished re-reading the Daily Prophet, and was feeling rather morose. There had been another dementor attack, along with a story concerning two seven year old Muggle girls that

were currently held at St. Mungo's after attempting to murder their grandparents. The Ministry believed they had been placed under the Imperius curse, but the local Healers were taking extra precautions around them. Harry had come inside early that afternoon; reading about it had made him distracted, and he wasn't able to keep his mind on what he was doing. Now, he kept wandering back over the prophecy, and what that meant for him. There was also another article about him in there, as well. Nothing concerning him leaving Privet Drive; apparently, the new Minister of Magic was attempting to confer with Professor Dumbledore about new security at Hogwarts. The Daily Prophet, of course, had spent most of the article talking about what that would mean for the "Champion".

It had made Harry sick.

Downstairs, he heard someone knocking at the door. As far as Harry knew, the Dursleys weren't expecting company, but even if they had been, none of their guests would have wanted to see him. He was content to listen to his Uncle Vernon grumble through the cracks in the floor about people that should call first before dropping in. That is, until he heard his aunt let out a horrible screech!

Harry had his wand in his hand as he threw open the bedroom door. It seemed impossible that Death Eaters could visit him here; Dumbledore had assured his mother's charm prevented that. Looking down the stairs, he was shocked to find Rayne standing in the doorway. He hadn't given the thought that it would be her; she always climbed up to his window. It was easy to see why Aunt Petunia had let out such a scream, however. Rayne was dressed in what looked like an expensive pair of leather pants and boot, both of which he thought might have been made out of dragon hide. Her top was a thin black material layered over by what appeared to be a goblin chestplate. The gauntlets she normally wore to conceal both of her wands were a bright silver this time, and gleamed against the pale sky.

"Hello," she greeted coolly. "I'm here to see Harry."

None of the Dursleys moved, so Rayne took the opportunity to slip past them. Harry could see now that she was carrying several parcels

under her arm. Dudley came out of the living room to see what was going on, and froze in his tracks the moment his eyes fell on Rayne. Harry rather enjoyed the look on his cousin's face, but seeing Rayne ignore him as if he weren't there proved to be the icing on the Cauldron Cake.

"Konichi wa," she said warmly, giving him a kiss on the forehead.

Harry felt a lurch somewhere deep down in his insides, like he'd just grabbed hold of a Portkey and was being thrown around like a roller coaster ride. It took him a second to realize Rayne had already walked past him to his room. He spared a glance down at the Dursleys, who'd gathered at the foot of the stairs and were all giving him mixed looks of fear, shock, confusion, disgust, and longing. Grinning, he left the hallway and closed the door behind him.

"That was brilliant!" he told her, unable to control his laughing.

"Nani?" Rayne responded, innocently. "I just thought I'd use the door for once. It's not a crime!"

"Sure," he mocked, still grinning cheekily from ear to ear. "What's all that stuff for?"

"You mentioned that your birthday was coming up. I thought we could go out and celebrate a little early, before you have to go off to Hogwarts and be the Wizarding world's Champion. Being cooped up in this house, you look like you could use a little fun."

Harry couldn't have agreed more, but the first thing that popped into his head was Dumbledore's letter. He'd been warned not to leave Privet Drive again, and someone was surely out there in case he tried, ready to stop him. Rayne had informed him during one of her last visits that wizards were watching the house. She taken to sneaking in undetected using a variety of spells and tricks picked up from her years as an Auror. None of them, she assured, had looked to be Dark wizards, which meant they were all members of the Order of the Phoenix sent on Dumbledore's orders. It infuriated him to think that he still wasn't trusted.

"I can go," he said, firmly. "I still have the right to leave my own house!"

Rayne smiled. "Good."

"What about the Order... the wizards that are watching us?" he amended. "How are we going to get out?"

"Just leave that part to me!" Rayne said, unwrapping one of the parcels. "First, though, I'd like you to trust me for a second."

Harry saw the bottle in her hand was labeled as Sleekeazy's Hair Potion #9. Rayne had drawn her left wand out carefully, and was waiting rather anxiously for Harry to say something.

"You just... looked like you needed a haircut," she said quickly. "And don't worry! I can put it back the way it was, if you don't like it."

Harry was reluctant at first, but slowly allowed himself to be led over to the chair by his desk. Rayne turned the seat around and made Harry lean his head back. She then conjured up a large basin and filled it with water. Placing it behind him, she poured the potion in and stirred it using her wand. Their eyes met for a moment, and Harry felt himself relax. Rayne dipped her fingers into the mixture, then began systematically running them through his hair. She slowly massaged his scalp with long, easy strokes, causing Harry to drift away into a deep trance.

He'd been given haircuts before, but always by Aunt Petunia, who was anything but gentle with him. This was so completely different, it took Harry by surprise. His breathing deepened to a steady pace; his heartbeat felt like soft thunder in his ears. Rayne was clipping away hair on the sides of his head, and further back. The potion clung to each strand like dew on a blade of grass. He could feel it sinking into him, and let out a soft sigh.

What might have been five minutes, or even several days later, Rayne pronounced she was finished. Clearing away the basin now full of potion and excess hair, she then transfigured it into a small

mirror so he could see himself. Harry found himself shocked at his appearance. His hair now stood straight up in long spikes, cut short at the sides and in back, leaving his scar exposed.

"What do you think?"

"I look..." he stammered, not sure how to put it.

His scar was now completely exposed. The bangs she'd left now stood straight up in the air at attention, along with the rest of his hair on top. Harry had never thought to make himself look different before now, but seeing it...

He found that he liked it! Though having his scar out for everyone to see made him feel a little discomforted, it didn't bother him enough to mention it. For the moment, he was just enjoying the way he looked.

"There's something else," Rayne said, holding up one of the parcels for him to take. "You told me that you'd never had clothes of your own, except for your Hogwarts uniforms. Well, the truth is, everything I wore growing up was issued to me by someone else. I thought you might appreciate getting some real wizard's clothing for a change. Plus, none of it has been worn before, so if you don't like it, we can take it back for..."

"This is brilliant!" Harry exclaimed. He'd been tearing at the brown paper the whole time, and was now holding out an ebony-shaded sleeveless cloak. It appeared to be made from the same material that Rayne wore. Harry slid his hands through it, and grinned down at himself. It actually felt more like a jacket than a cloak. There was no hood to go up over his head, but it hung much too far down near his ankles. The fit was still perfect, though.

Harry thanked Rayne several times, then together, they moved through the two remaining gifts she'd brought. Soon, Harry was changed into a matching shirt and pants, with dragonskin boots. He nearly didn't recognize himself when he caught a glimpse in the mirror. Rayne was standing behind him, leaning in close.

"You look incredible," she whispered closely in his ear. "I love it!"

"So do I," he told her.

They went back downstairs together. Harry wanted to grab her by the hand, but resisted. Rayne was, after all, older than him and just being a good friend. He couldn't help but notice, though, how often their fingers brushed up against each other. At the landing, he got the door for her, and saw the Dursleys watching from around the corner. Dudley looked away when Harry met his face defiantly. Aunt Petunia looked as though she wanted to throw something, and Uncle Vernon was burning a bright red.

Harry closed the door behind him, letting it fall off the patchwork job Vernon had done earlier, and followed Rayne out to her bike in the street. Climbing on, he took the helmet from her without a word and slipped it on snugly. Rayne started the engine and roared off down the street. In a few moments, once they'd cleared Privet Drive, she slammed a fist down on a red button he saw glowing brightly on the dash, and the motorcycle suddenly lifted up off into the air.

Harry's stomach gave a lurch, and he held onto Rayne by the waist. After the shock wore off, he looked around to see they were flying up near the clouds vaguely eastward. It was nothing like riding a broomstick, but he found it enjoyable. A small part of him thought for a brief second that he'd done this before somewhere.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked, suddenly.

"To a little place I know in London," Rayne told him. "And don't worry! It's my treat."

Harry had neglected to bring any gold from his trunk. He was grateful for the offer, but felt it was wrong to expect Rayne to pay his way for him. Of course, she might take offense if he declined. Harry mused that it was probably best not to argue with her, especially while they were several hundred feet up in the air!

Eventually, Rayne began to tip the bike downward. Harry saw as they closed in a rather large road that led straight into what must be London. Harry wasn't terribly familiar with the road system that led



through these parts, seeing as how the Dursleys never took him anywhere if they could help it. Perhaps the only exception had been before his first year at Hogwarts, when his Uncle Vernon had unceremoniously dumped him off at King's Cross before driving away laughing. He didn't recognize this part of town, though Rayne must know where they were going. She handled the streets as if she'd been through here several times before.

Soon, they were headed through what looked like a terribly rough sort of neighborhood. Harry was suddenly reminded of the time last year when he'd been brought to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. The streets were similar, though there were a great deal more people standing out on them. Several of them, Harry noted, were older women of about Rayne's age. They were dressed very differently, though, which meant this was clearly a Muggle area. Rayne drove the bike down to a small corner, then veered sharply to the right. Up ahead was a bent signpost that Harry saw, as they drove past, read 'Betwix and Between'.

A moment later, it became clear that this was another entry point to the wizarding world made invisible. Rayne rode the bike up to an archway at the end of the road. There was nothing beyond it save for a cemetery that glowed brightly in the evening light. The moment Rayne tapped her wand against the side seven times, the ground beyond the arch opened up, forming a ramp that lead farther down. Rayne gunned the engine and Harry held on tightly as they rode on together.

At first glance, Harry thought perhaps they had come to Diagon Alley by mistake. There was another archway at the bottom, leading into a square full of shops and street vendors. None of these people looked like they'd ever been on Diagon Alley before, though. Harry looked around at the crowds milling together while Rayne parked her bike in a nearby spot next to a bunch of broomsticks that had locks on them.

"Are we in..." Harry asked her, cautiously. "Is this Knockturn Alley?"

Rayne smiled. "I wouldn't have thought you'd recognize a place like this! When did you first come here?"

Harry quickly recalled the first time he'd ever traveled by Floo Powder. He'd gone from the Weasley fireplace to a place called Borgin and Burkes in the space of several confusing minutes. The Dark Arts shop had also been the first time Harry had met Draco Malfoy's father. It had been a forgettable experience overall, and Harry considered asking if they could go somewhere else. Rayne was looking at him a bit uncomfortably, as if afraid she'd somehow done wrong. He found the look quite contradictory to the person he'd befriended recently, and nodded.

"Right! Let's go, then. Where's this place you wanted to show me?"

Rayne took Harry by the arm, and together they made their way through the crowds. Most of the people were too busy yelling over each other's voices and screaming about prices to really notice he was there. A couple of times, he had to fight the urge to flatten his hair down to cover his scar, but it would have been for nothing. There was no recognition in the faces of anyone who stared his way, though there did seem to be a glint of something hungry in the eyes of several older girls. When they were about halfway through, something smacked him across the head, making him lose his grip on Rayne. For a moment, Harry looked around in confusion.

Something made him turn, then, and he saw her standing next to a small stand, where two witches were fighting over what looked like a set of Hippogriff lungs. The little girl was holding the same red ball, and smiling his way. The moment Harry took a step towards her, someone walked in his path. By the time they had moved, she was gone again. Harry stared at the spot where she'd been, as if to will her back. Then Rayne appeared next to him, looking concerned.

"Something wrong?" she asked, bending near him so he could hear.

"I thought I saw..." he began, then shook his head. "Never mind."

They started heading in the direction that Rayne was leading again. "What happened?" she asked, dodging out of the path of a seven-year old on a miniature broom.

"It felt like something hit me on the back of the head," he replied, wondering if Rayne should hear the whole story.

"Hmmm," she mused, looking him over. "You're hair isn't even mussed. I guess that Sleekeazy Potion really is good stuff!"

"Yeah," Harry muttered, only half-listening.

"You were looking over at the stand like you saw something. I was worried for a second that it was trouble again!"

He hesitated for just a second. "I thought I saw someone I knew," he confessed. "It looked like a girl I've seen around in Surrey a lot recently."

"The one you saw in the alley behind Broken Anthem?" Harry thought Rayne seemed worried, so he decided to drop the subject.

"Maybe," he shrugged. "It probably wasn't her, though. She was gone too fast for me to notice."

"Yosh!"

Rayne seemed much more at ease, now. Together, the two of them continued down the darkened street, sticking close to one another. Rayne's hand felt warm in his now, sending gooseflesh along up his arm. As they reached a corner, he took notice of a softly glowing sign overhead, just to take his mind off it. The lettering showed that it was a place called 'Squib's Corner'.

"That is an easy place to get ripped off," Rayne warned. "Squibs love magical items that substitute for a lack of personal magic. It's why the place was built to begin with! If you're careful, though, you might find things you wouldn't believe stashed away."

Soon, they were standing in front of what looked like the entrance to a small, two story warehouse. Harry allowed Rayne to go first, then followed in after her. The moment he entered the place, his ears were assaulted by a throbbing beat that reverberated off the walls. It wasn't until he stepped out further in the room, and saw the mass of

pulsating bodies, that Harry realized this was some sort of a club. There were all sorts of people moving around, dancing to the banging rhythm of the beat. Harry could see at once that there were far more people who weren't Squibs in this place. There were just too many for them all to not have magic, and most of them didn't fully resemble humans, either. Harry was sure there were a couple of half-giants out in the crowd, and one girl who may or may not have been part banshee let out a screeching wail that could be heard in spite of everything else!

He quickly followed Rayne out onto the dance floor. Harry thought they might have to blast their way through just to avoid being crushed, but the mass of bodies parted the moment they both approached. Several people waved as Harry walked past, pointing at his scar. Once they reached the middle of the floor, Rayne turned around and reached out wordlessly for Harry to take her hand. Nervous, and unsure of what exactly Rayne expected him to do, Harry did so.

Rayne began to lead Harry through a rather interesting dance number. They were pressed very close together, and more than once, some part of him brushed up against her. If Rayne was bothered by it, she didn't let on. Harry looked around as he tried to keep up and saw that most people were doing more or less the same thing. This was nothing like the Yule Ball he'd so reluctantly endured back during the Twiwizard Tournament, yet Harry found as the song drew to a close that he was enjoying himself. The band up on stage immediately lead into another song. Rayne kept right on dancing, swaying rather elaborately with him.

It wasn't long before he found himself getting into it. More people were watching him, and he'd begun to get the hang of how Rayne moved her body. When she bent down, he waited just a moment, and then followed after her. People were gathering around and cheering as one song passed over into another. Finally, the music stopped.

It happened so suddenly, Harry thought perhaps something had gone wrong. Everyone began pumping their fists into the air and cheered, rallying around where he stood. Rayne didn't let go of Harry for an instant, and began nuzzling playfully against his ear like a kitten. Moisture was pouring out of his body in droves. The cloak he was

wearing felt heavy, but he wasn't about to take it off. There was no place to put it in any case, and the crowd of people looked like they weren't going to let him through.

Rayne pulled him closer to her as the music started again, running a finger through her hair. At first, Harry wondered if she wasn't trying to make it go flat, but as the song picked up, he realized she was stroking it. Her fingers brushed across his scap, making him shudder. If Rayne understood the effect she was having on him, she didn't let on. Harry tried to keep his mind on moving steadily to the beat in order to avoid crushing her toes, but it was a lost cause. He didn't trip over anyone, including himself, but his brain was too foggy to have noticed in either case!

Harry felt like he'd been filled up to the brink with a warm, heavy substance. Even though his heart felt thick and full, beating hard in his chest, the rest of him was light and airy. He could have levitated up to the ceiling without uttering a word. It felt wonderful. He'd never imagined in all his life that he could ever feel so...

At peace.

He never wanted the feeling to end!

However many songs they danced through, Harry didn't know. Eventually, he and Rayne pulled away from each other as one particularly slow and nostalgic tune came to a finish. Harry was looking at her through very heavy eyelids, but the smile Rayne gave him seemed very mischevious.

"Harry," she whispered in his ear. "Would you mind waiting right here for just a second?"

Harry blinked. "What?"

A small goblin came trotting by, carrying a tray full of different colored drinks on top of it. Rayne flagged him down, took one brightly colored purple one off, and paid him handsomely for it. The goblin gave her a rather lewd grin, then bowed and walked off into the rest of the crowd.

Rayne pressed the drink into Harry's hands, then leaned in to where he could hear her.

"I'll be right back," she told him. "Don't go too far!"

The drink had a layer of foam on top, and was coughing up a kind of spiral smoke. He thought it would make him even more sleepy, for some reason, but one whiff of it caught Harry's heart to collide with his chest. Fearful that one sip might make his chest explode, he dipped a finger in ever so slightly and licked the droplet off. There was no burning sensation this time. Whatever it was, it had a very rich flavor to it that somehow reminded him of Christmas treats at Hogwarts. The smell also carried a faint scent of something he remembered from the Burrow. Taking a deep breath, he took a big swallow and waited as it traveled warmly down his throat.

Time seemed to stand still for a moment. Harry thought the room was swaying a little, but he managed to stay on his feet. He didn't drink anymore of the odd concoction for a while, however. His brain was just starting to clear, leaving him to wonder where Rayne had gone to, when the room suddenly fell silent.

Everyone seemed just as shocked as he was. Fingering his wand, Harry scanned the room for signs of danger, but the magically amplified sounds of someone talking put him at ease a little moments later. The voice seemed to come from all directions, making it impossible for him to detect. Harry listened closely as the announcer spoke in a rather gruff tone, running words together more than once.

Tonight, for one night only,

The Underground is proud to present...

Raynefall!

Harry turned as a light fell on a portion of the club higher up near the rafters. It looked almost like a stage, and a second later his theory was confirmed. Rayne suddenly appeared amid a cloud of blue and pink smoke, dressed to kill in a flowery printed kimono robe. Harry stood there dumbstruck, wondering what was about to happen. His

mind came up with several vivid possibilities as the music started, making him swallow a rather large gulp of the drink still in his hand. This time, it did burn going down, but he was far too distracted to notice! Rayne had begun to dance.

The crowd immediately began cheering. The music that was playing had a very heavy beat to it, making it easy for her to move to the rhythm. As the song picked up, she somehow magicked what looked like a microphone out of the air, and started to sing.

Harry was startled to find that Rayne really could sing, and very well for that matter. The crowd was chanting her name, as if she'd done this a million times before in front of them. Several wizards there were making some very lewd remarks near him, which led to Harry gripping the glass. He needn't have worried, though, for as the first chorus ended, Rayne leaped down from the stage in a glorious single body movement. Her kimono went flying off as she did, revealing what was underneath.

Rayne knelt down before Harry. His mind didn't fully register what she had on now, but an image of one of Dudley's magazines floated up from the back of his mind to compare. Harry pushed the thought away as she danced towards him, motioning with her finger for him to join her. People all around began screaming and cheering, pushing him towards her. Harry resisted for a moment, but gave up after someone behind him placed a very large and hairy palm against his back and sent him falling forward.

The two of them danced together like they never had before. Rayne kept twisting and turning for the audience, making it difficult for Harry to keep up. Throwing caution to the wind, he downed the rest of his drink in a single gulp, then raced forward up to meet her. Harry seized her in his arms as they collided. His brain had been temporarily shut down by the noise of the crowd around him, and the fiery drink now coursing through his veins. He and Rayne kissed then, in front of a room full of people, who suddenly became totally unimportant. Rayne kissed him back, making his heart leap. She was kissing him as he'd never been kissed before, like she'd kissed him in his dreams a dozen times now. The people all around them vanished

in an instant. The music was gone; there was no one left in the whole wizarding world except for them.

Rayne finally pulled back, inciting a roar of protest from everyone. Moving a little more slowly, she danced a ways back, then began to levitate herself up over the crowd back to the stage. Harry watched her as if in a trance, not sure whether he was dreaming this time or not. People were coming up all around him to slap him on the back and shake his hand. A couple of guys asked him if Ryane was his girlfriend or not, and if so, could they borrow her from him. Harry paid them no mind whatsoever.

Rayne had begun dancing again. Her voice carried over to his ears over the people still talking to him. He only had eyes for her as she twisted around for the few people left who had gathered close by. For some unfathomable reason, he caught sight of a sign hanging not far from the stage. Someone had left it swinging there haphazardly. It looked as though it might fall any second. Harry managed to make out the words as Rayne finished her song.

'Although you've damned me, my Lord, I praise you!'

Someone heard him reading it aloud, and laughed. "You've got that right, young fella!"

The crowd began to disperse as Rayne made her way back through. Harry watched her with a growing sense of anticipation and fear. He almost thought for a moment that she'd be angry with him for what he'd done. The moment she came close enough, however, Rayne closed her mouth around his and kissed him with a wild abandon. Harry held on to her, kissing right back, as a new song cut through. It was nowhere near suitable for slow dancing, and Harry suddenly had the urge to go somewhere else. He was just about to disengage and ask Rayne, when loud cry went up over the crowd again.

This one was not amplified by magic. It sounded from a distance, and came from the far back near the entrance that they'd come in through. Someone was running panicked, almost like Professor Quirrel had during Harry's first year when he'd burst through the Great Hall to announce that a troll was in the dungeon.



"Aurors!" the woman screamed, fearfully. "Aurors! They're coming in through the front entrance!"

Aurors? Harry wondered.

"Come on!" Rayne shouted over the sudden pandemonium. "We've got to get out of here!"

## Chapter 7

### Dudley Destoryer

by Ri-kun

Chaos was erupting all over the place. Harry kept a tight grip on Rayne as they ran side-by-side against the flow of the crowd. Rayne seemed to know where they were going, so he let her lead them. A couple of people were coming up close behind, giving chase. Harry had his wand at the ready, on the chance they tried something, but it turned out that they were just fellow club-goers trying to escape.

There was a door up ahead. Harry and Rayne were at the forefront of the crowd, and burst through into a dimly lit side alley. A mass of what looked like Dark wizards and several odd assortment of creatures followed closely after. People were still screaming inside the building, trying to get away. Harry felt the urge to try and do something, but then he remembered that those were Aurors.

"We have to go, Harry!" she told him, again seeming to read his mind. "There's nothing you can do. If they catch you here..."

Feeling confused, he allowed himself to be lead back into the main part of Knockturn Alley. There were Aurors and other Ministry officials standing around outside near the front entrance. Harry immediately wished he had remembered to bring his Invisibility Cloak. He felt the absense of it then like a constant ache. They had no choice but to take the long route. Some of the officials standing around there noticed a banshee and two hags making a run for it. Harry recognized them as some of the ones that came out with he and Rayne, and felt a twinge of pity as the Aurors gave chase.

Ironically, they did provide him with an idea distraction. With the Aurors so focused solely in the opposite direction, slipping by into the crowd of bystanders was relatively easy. A mass of wizards and witches had gathered round, most of them looking thoroughly disgusted. It was clear that the Ministry wasn't welcome here, in spite of their gate crashing. Harry did his best to keep his scar covered with one hand. Rayne nodded in affirmation when she realized what he

was doing, and kept a wand out in his stead. It was slow going to avoid detection, but they managed to get back to the bike. It was still parked in the exact same spot where they'd left it.

The moment Harry reached it, he nearly fell over the side of it from relief.

"Not one of your better dates, I would take it?" Rayne said, reaching for her helmet.

Harry looked up at her, and thought carefully. "I really can't say," he replied, getting to his feet. "I'm not exactly an expert on how dates are supposed to go!"

That made Rayne stare. "You're joking, right?"

Harry grinned. "The first girl I ever asked out shot me down for a seventh-year Quidditch captain. I spent my first dance sitting over in a corner watching other people dance with my best friend, Ron, because he was angry at a girl named Hermione. Also, I was afraid to go out onto the dance floor," he added, sheepishly.

"The only other comparison I have to this involved a girl who asked me out, but only because I was with her dead boyfriend when he was killed by Lord Voldemort." Again, Rayne did not react to the name like other people. "So," Harry finished. "In all honesty, things are going pretty well! Having Aurors burst through the door isn't nearly so bad as you might think!"

Rayne looked as though she wasn't sure if Harry was serious or not. "You really aren't joking, are you?"

Adrenaline was pumping through him, now. He'd just had a very close call with the Ministry of Magic, who no doubt would've been very interested to know why he was in a dance club with Dark wizards. The thought seemed foreign, yet he couldn't help but grin. It felt wonderful to be out in the magical world, even in such a place like Knockturn Alley. The only time he'd ever been allowed to explore was back before his third year, and people were panicked then because they thought a deranged killer was on the loose!

That killer, of course, had been his godfather, Sirius Black. Harry's face fell for a moment, remembering how his godfather would have likely found the whole situation very funny. He'd been told by others that Sirius and his father had been notorious troublemakers at his age. He wondered now what they might have thought of Rayne, who was currently watching him closely.

"Harry," she leaned forward, looking worried. "Are you okay?"

"Just..." He considered lying for a second, but decided to tell the truth. "Thinking about Sirius. It just sort of... came up on me all of a sudden. It happens like that a lot, really. Something at random reminds me of him."

"It does get better," she told him, gently. "Little by little, things will get better."

Harry remembered the prophecy that Dumbledore had relayed to him at the end of last term. About how he would have to destroy Voldemort completely, or else face the exact same fate. Neither of them could live while the other survived! Those words echoed in his head, until Rayne took his face in her hands. Pulling him close, she kissed him ever so softly this time, letting her lips trail over his like the lightest of raindrops.

Rayne's grip on his arms tightened, causing pain. Harry pulled back a little, only to find her eyes had grown very narrow. She was looking behind them, as if waiting for something to happen. Harry got the right idea, but at a fraction of a second too late. There was movement, a flicker of shadows that came from the sides, and suddenly the world all around them went dark. Harry fought to struggle, but his arms and legs had somehow lost the ability to move. He was dimly aware of them, but it felt as though he'd somehow become separated from the rest of his body. It occurred to him that he might have been Imperiused. If that were the case, then he should have been able to fight off the effects!

Several seconds of useless struggling later, however, it became clear that this wasn't the case. Harry had been subjected to the

Imperius Curse numerous times, back in his fourth year. An imposter had jinxed everyone in their Defense Against the Dark Arts class, to whether they'd be able to fight it off. He'd been one of the few to do it properly. This time, however, all his resistance served to do was make him feel exhausted, despite not feeling his body. That, and extremely frustrated!

The next thing Harry knew, the word suddenly came back into focus. Air rushed up to meet his sweat-drenched face, and Knockturn Alley had vanished. He was standing in a small room, rather like a jail cell. A door slammed loudly behind him, indicating that he was correct, and had just been shut away. There was no one else here but himself. He had no idea how he'd come to be here; Harry had never Apparated before, but that couldn't be ruled out just yet. Feeling for his wand, he found that he still had it with him.

Now, he was confused. Any wizard would have thought to search him, surely. Unless, perhaps, they felt that an underqualified wizard wouldn't be able to escape from this place! There were no windows or wide cracks, nothing that could provide him with a clue as to where exactly he was. Harry began to worry that this was all a very elaborate trick. Something odd was definitely happening, and Rayne...

With a jolt, Harry remembered Rayne! She'd been with him when they were jumped from behind; perhaps she was somewhere nearby, needing his help. Harry gripped his wand, and prepared to curse the only door to his cell open.

Hesitation took hold of him, then. The safest thing might be to simply wait and see what they wanted. If Death Eaters were behind all this, Rayne would most likely be tortured for information. He couldn't just stand back and let that happen, but the last time Harry had gone running off to save somebody, it had turned out to be a trap. The door stood before him, almost tauntingly. He lowered his wand for a moment, feeling defeat, but then raised it back up.

His hand was shaking slightly, but when Harry spoke, there was little tremor in his voice.

"Alohamora!"

The door swung open expectantly. No guards had been posted outside, and the corridor beyond was completely deserted, except for a few torches hanging by the walls to provide minimal light. Harry kept his wand at the ready, keeping watch at both ends for any sign of movement, as he made his way down the passage. Scratches came from the walls, indicating mice, or worse! Harry steadied himself, and proceeded forward.

He'd gone a couple of feet, when the sound of footsteps came rushing forward from around a corner up ahead. There was no place to hide, and he was too far away from his cell to make it back in time. Harry had never performed a Disillusionment Charm on himself before. He'd always relied on his Invisibility Cloak to provide cover, which he did not have at the moment, of course! Whoever was coming had just about reached the turn. Harry pointed his wand at himself in desperation, and tapped the top of his head three times.

A very cold sensation rolled over him, like something thick was pouring down from where his wand touched him. Harry gave himself a shiver, and hoped just as two figures in cloaks came near, that he'd done it right. The two were talking rather animatedly with one another, and didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. Apparently, he'd done the spell right after all!

"I still can't believe that," one said in a raspy voice. "Where did she say she found it?"

"In a shop on the surface!" the other replied, sounding amused. "That place that caters to Squibs and such? It was just lying in a cushion on display in the front window. The owner obviously thought it was valuable."

"Of course, he would have!" the first went on, brushing right past Harry's arm. "But he..."

The speaker paused, and whirled around to stare back the way they'd come. Harry saw in the dim light that both men were vampires. One looked closely at the spot where he was standing, then turned to the other.

"What was it?"

"I don't know," he said. "But for a second there, I was sure I smelled chicken blood!"

The other vampire laughed. "You're imagining things. Let's hurry up, or we'll miss the fun. I can't wait to see what Sakura is going to do to that filthy half-breed dhampir!"

The two chortled together, as if sharing some horribly funny joke. Harry took about half a minute to decide, then went after them. He didn't know where they were going, but one of them had mentioned a girl. Plus, they were going to do something bad to a...

Harry realized he hadn't caught that last part very well. It had sounded like a dhampir, a word he had never come across in any of his school books. Chances were, though, he would have better luck tailing them. Of course, he mused, as they rounded several turns one after the other, the dhampir in question might not be something he wanted to get involved with. He realized, as they came up upon a great set of double doors, that he was doing exact what Hermione had warned him about once more.

His 'saving people' thing.

The doors opened, and Harry stepped through right behind the two vampires. The room beyond was full of people, all of them appearing to be of the undead. It would be impossible for him to maneuver in here, with so many standing closely together. Plus, he could remember from a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson years ago that vampires had a strong sense of smell. Almost as good as werewolves! Harry was sure someone would catch his scent before long.

No one moved towards him, though. Maybe Disillusionment Charms covered his scent as well as his appearance? Harry had never paid much attention to them before, so he was shooting in the dark. After several minutes of standing by the doors, where no one else came through, and none of the vampires paid him any notice, Harry

decided to chance it. The area closest to the wall was largely unoccupied. The vampires were mostly sticking to the center of the room, particularly close to the other side.

Clinging to the wall, he made his way over to the opposite end, curious to see what was there. If anything, it could be a clue to Rayne's whereabouts.

As he drew closer, Harry saw that it was a platform, raised up to where everyone could see clearly. And on the platform was a large, wooden X, with a person draped out across it. Harry felt his stomach grow thick with a sick fury as he recognized the pale, raven-haired woman suspended there for all to see. Throwing caution to the wind, Harry made his way over to where Rayne was stretched out, coming too close to several vampires more than once. Still, none seemed aware of his presence.

Harry snuck up behind the platform, and gave the wooden X a tap. Rayne lifted her head slightly, and stared over near where he hid. Her nostrils flared for a second as she seemed to sniff the air.

"Harry?" Rayne said in a weak but steady voice. "Is that you?"

"Hang on!" he told her, raising his wand. "I'm getting you out of here!"

"Bad pun, Harry," she croaked, smiling. "Can't do anything at this point but hang on! Harry, are you aware that your legs are showing?"

"What?" Harry looked down at himself. About half of his body was covered in a thick liquid that blended half-heartedly with the background. The rest of him, everything from about the waist on down, was clearly visible. He'd been walking around all this time with only a partially formed Disillusionment Charm, and the half that did work seemed to be wearing off very quickly!

"But that means," Harry thought aloud. "That means, all this time..."

"Took you long enough!"



Harry and Rayne both raised up at the same time. A small, young girl, not much older than him, was looking down from the foot of the platform. A wicked grin lay plastered all over her face, and he could see fangs sparkling in the darkness. Every vampire in the room had turned simultaneously to face them, all wearing similar, hungry expressions.

"We had our orders, after all," the girl went on. "To make sure you reached her without any trouble. For all the talk about you, I expected something better. I mean, aren't you supposed to have a Cloak for this sort of thing?"

"He's having it cleaned," Rayne quipped bravely. "Vampire dust takes forever to wash out, you know!"

The girl scowled, baring her fangs to the both of them. "I don't take talk like that from a filthy half-breed mongrel!" she spat. "We were told to take you both alive, but no one said anything about in what shape!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The girl went flying backwards into the crowd of onlookers. Vampires gasped in shock, and there was a sickening crack as the mass moved out of the way to let her land backwards on the hard floor. She didn't get up for several seconds, in which time, the vampires looked over at Harry with new respect in their faces.

Unquestionable rage, but new respect, as well.

"No one," he said threateningly. "No one calls my friends 'half-breed'! Is that clear?!"

Absolute silence followed, in which the girl tried unsuccessfully to untangle herself and stand. No one was moving to help her out. Harry, meanwhile, turned halfway around and whispered to Rayne.

"I didn't know you were Muggle-born! Why didn't you just tell me?"

Rayne stared at him. "Harry, I think we should get out of here!"

"Oh," he realized, noticing that the vampires hadn't exactly backed down yet. "Good idea!"

"Not so fast!" The girl had finally climbed back to her feet, and was glaring daggers at Harry. "We were told to keep you here, so this is where you stay. Our mother will be very angry if you tried to leave! We haven't even gotten to your present yet!"

The girl stomped her foot angrily, as if pouting. "Present?" Harry asked. "What present?"

"It's almost time for the Champion to open his present," she said, gloating. "And what an extra special surprise it is! Come on out, Duddykins!"

Harry's jaw dropped the moment he heard her say the name, but even after the figure standing behind her came into full view, he couldn't believe it. Dudley Dursley stumbled forward, pale and haggard-looking, his clothes in a state Aunt Petunia would have never approved of. It looked as if he'd been beaten a little, as well. Two puncture wounds could be seen clearly on his neck, indicating that his blood had been drained. Harry felt his own blood rush down out of his cheeks.

Dudley grinned at him, then, a kind of leering taunt, and pointed. Harry could feel his knees give way a little, causing him to fall forward off the platform. He landed amid the sea of vampire faces, all of them watching closely. Wand raised, Harry advanced slowly on his cousin, wondering what he could possibly do to help. There was no cure for vampirism, at least none that he'd heard of. Harry wasn't an expert at the subject anyways. Pity stabbed at him as he looked on at the face of the one who'd spent so many years tormenting him. It seemed strange now after so long that Dudley would wind up this way.

"ello, cousin!" Dudley croaked, still leering. "Like the new face?"

"Dudley..." he stammered. "What did they... do to you?!"

"They made me," he whispered, sounding more than a bit foreign. "They built me. I'm stronger now, stronger than I ever was before. Faster, too!"

Dudley paused, giggling. "Can you see yourself right now?"

"Dudley," Harry breathed. "Whatever they've done to you, I'm sure..."

"Shut up!" Dudley's face suddenly became contorted with rage. "Shut up! You're thinking?! Since when has anyone ever cared about what you thought before?"

Harry felt himself going mad. "There's no time for this, Dudley. You need to come with us! We can..."

"You can't do anything," Dudley laughed, his voice like death on bells. "You've never been able to do anything. Remember the time we chased you through the school yard? You couldn't even turn around to fight back! And how about the time Piers Polkis and I held your head in the toilet for twenty minutes straight while the teacher stood out in the hallway. You screamed for help, but nobody ever paid any mind!"

The vampires around them began snickering, now. They were closing in, forming a circle around where he and Dudley stood. Harry felt his face grow red with shame as he recalled the incident. Aunt Petunia had locked him in the cupboard for three days upon his return home. The school had sent a note, saying that he was playing with the water in the washroom.

"And how about gym class?" Dudley went on. "Always the last to be picked. No one has ever wanted you, and no one wants you know. Those freaks at your school send you back just to keep you away! Even your own freaky kind don't want you around!"

His chest tightened with rage.

"Not even your poor mum and dad!" Dudley jeered. "Went and got themselves killed, just to keep from having too..."

"Diffindo!"

The spell struck across Dudley's face diagonally. Blood splattered everywhere, and his cousin gave a howl of pain as the torn flesh lay open, but then immediately began to close up. Within seconds, it was as if Harry's wand hadn't touched him.

"Diffindo!" Harry shouted again, but even as the spell made contact, the skin healed itself. Dudley, however, was still feeling a great deal of pain.

"Diffindo!" he screamed.

"Diffindo!"

"Diffindo!"

Dudley was writhing in agony, now. He had yet to fall over, but slashes of open wounds covered his body, from which blood poured freely. His clothes were even more tattered than before, but Harry couldn't have cared less.

"Relashio!" he cried, causing even deeper cuts to tear at him.

Dudley stumbled forward, then, and fell to his knees. Harry had a brief memory of him from the previous summer, moaning in agony the way he was now after a particularly vicious dementor assault staged by the Ministry. His cousin was looking up at him now, eyes glazed over, pleading for mercy. Harry couldn't hear what he was saying, though. The vampires all around them were cheering him on, gloating him to finish the job. A reckless rage had seized him, the likes of which Harry had never felt before. His ears were clouded with a faint buzzing. He raised his wand, preparing to lower it one last time.

**BANG!**

And explosion overhead brought him back to his senses! Fire erupted from all around, sending the vampires running scared. The flames approached him, but then pulled back as though in recognition. Harry whirled around to see Rayne leaning up against the platform for

support, a single wand in hand, and looking quite grim. Looking back at Dudley, he saw his cousin looking up expectantly, eyes closed, as if wanting Harry to deliver the final blow. Turning around, he ran over to where Rayne clung, trying to forget about what he'd almost done.

"Spare wand," she muttered, weakly. "Always keep... spare wand handy in case of... emergency."

"This qualifies," he nodded, wrapping her arm around his shoulder. "Thanks for the save. Is there anything we can do about..."

Rayne shook her head quickly. "That's not... your cousin," she hissed, painfully. "Metamorphmagus turned vampire. Recognized him by the giggle! Only one vampire I know sounds like that..."

Harry almost stopped and looked back, but made himself keep going. The fires behind them were beginning to die down. Conjuring the flames had clearly been a last ditch effort on Rayne's part, and the spell had obviously tapped her magical resources for the moment. It was up to him to get them both out of there. The trouble was, Harry had no idea which way to go!

"Do you know a way out of here?" he asked, as some of the braver vampires came closing in.

"Didn't see a way," she mumbled, weakly. "On your right!"

"Incendio!"

Harry must not have been focusing right, because the spell engulfed everything within a ten foot radius. The others seemed to take this as a warning, however, and held back. Harry took the initiative, and charged forward with Rayne stumbling beside him as fast as he could.

"Used... Dusk Bags," she explained, once they reached the hallway. "Magical sacks that stop the victim's awareness of time. So long as they're over you, you've got no idea where you're going, or how long they've had you!"

That explained a great deal. Harry helped to carry her out as, behind them, he could hear the undead regrouping. It sounded as though more of them were coming down the hall after them already. Harry quickly opened the nearest door with his wand, and ducked inside with Rayne.

"Barricade," she told him, barely audible now. "Spell is... redan revalinis. Can you do it?"

Harry nodded, and pointed his wand to the door. "Redan Revalinis!"

Chains and locks instantly sprang up around the door, along with several metal planks that criss-crossed and clanked shut over one another. Harry paused to admire the handiwork for a second, then tended to Rayne.

"I'm alright," she whispered, touching his shoulder. "I just... feel so tired. Weak! Pretty pathetic, huh?"

"No way!" he told her, feeling ashamed at what he'd been about to do. "You were brilliant, as usual. Those flames saved both our lives."

Rayne smiled, sheepishly. "When we get out of here, remind me to give you a big reward for your bravery. But first, help me get off this thing!"

Harry hadn't been paying any attention to what Rayne was resting on. Lifting her up to her feet, he lit his wand and gazed down at the small, oddly shaped box. It was a trunk of some kind, but very ordinantly decorately, and clearly devoted to the darkest of Arts. The chest itself seemed to be radiating a kind of black cloud that filled the space around it. Harry had the sudden urge to back away from it, and began helped Rayne over to the corner.

"Something's inside that," she told him, crouching on the dirty floor. "I can feel it!"

"Me too," he whispered. There was movement outside the door. "Is there another way out of here?"

"Dunno," she said, not taking her eyes off the chest. "We need to find one, though. I don't like being in here with that thing!"

"Me neither!" It gave off a feeling of ominous warning.

"We really shouldn't open it," he said, more to himself.

"Definitely not," she agreed, meeting his eye.

"We shouldn't..."

"Right..."

Together, they aimed their wands at the chest. The lid of it exploded off, leaving a cloud of smoke and dust in the air long after it landed. Harry stood up to walk over and peer inside it. Rayne tried to follow, but apparently her strength was all gone now. She settled for leaning forward as Harry brought the chest closer. It didn't appear to be jinxed itself; his hands didn't burn as he touched the cool metal, nor did any of his hair fall out.

"Don't touch it!" Rayne warned, when he stuck a hand closer. "It's... dangerous. I don't know how, but that thing is."

"You're right," he sighed. He hadn't been thinking clearly when he did it. "What is that, though? It looks like a..."

It looked vaguely like a stone heart. The rock was a solid black, and smelled of death and blood. There were tiny holes all along the surface, and four petrified tubes leading out, exactly the way a normal human heart would have had. The air around it hissed, as if it were breathing somehow. Harry wanted to close the lid and forget he'd ever peeked inside.

"Where'd they find something like that?" Rayne wondered.

"The Squib Corner," Harry answered at once. "I overheard two of the vampires talking about it being in the display window."

"Figures!" she muttered, looking away. "Of all the places for a Dark object to be..."

"What do you suppose it does?"

"Something very bad, I'm sure," she said, gravely. "The vampire that impersonated your cousin? I know him from a while back. He was always looking for a bit of extra power, no matter what the cost!"

That sounded vaguely familiar to Harry, but he said nothing. "If he's gotten hold of something this big, then there's more going on here than just a few vampires getting rowdy now that the Dark forces are growing stronger. I don't know what, but we need to take this thing with us. Give me a second to catch my breath, and I'll whip something up!"

"Here, let me!" Harry insisted. "I'll do it."

Rayne looked like she was going to argue, but then smiled and nodded her consent. Harry summoned a thick hankie out of the air, and lowered it down over the still-hissing heart stone. The object felt hot even through the fabric, and Harry thought his scar gave a twinge. Erring to the side of caution, he pointed his wand and used magic to wrap it up the rest of the way. Rayne was able to transfigure a rock over on the far side of the room into a stone box to place it in. Harry felt a lot safer with it inside that, though he could still feel it weighing against the side pocket of his cloak.

"Now, we just need a way out of here!"

Unfortunately, Harry had run out of brilliant ideas. The room was sealed solid, with only the barricaded door as a means of getting out. With no options left, Harry canceled the spell, and stuck his head out around the corner. The hallway was empty, lit up much brighter now. Something moved out the corner of his eye, but Harry was ready for it. There was a small squeak, and he lowered his wand in surprise.

"Shhh!" the little girl told him, letting go of the red ball in her hand to press a finger to her lips. "Be very quiet! They might come back any second."



"How..." he wondered, then shook his head. "Listen, do you know a way out of here?"

The little girl, nodded. "Follow the passage back that way," she pointed. "Turn right, and keep going until you find a small door with a big brass knocker on it. Knock three times, and the door will open for you. Don't try using magic; it won't work."

"Come with us!" he insisted, reaching out with his spare hand. "It's not safe for you hear."

"They'll never find me," she replied, backing away. "You need to go now. I suspect they'll be coming along back this way soon. And be sure to take the Heart of Darkness with you. I'm sure they're planning something bad with it."

"Hold on," Harry said. "What did you say it was..."

"Harry?" Rayne called out. "Harry, who are you talking to?"

"Just a sec!" he said, pulling his head back in. "There's something I need to..."

But when Harry looked back out again, she was gone. He wasted several seconds debating whether to go and look for her. There was definitely something funny about that girl, and he had the distinct feeling things were far from over. For the time, however, he would have to settle for getting himself and Rayne out of there!

Harry went back in and helped lift Rayne out with one arm. She carried the box for him, while he held his wand at the ready. To the end of the corridor, they marched, keeping a close eye out for any signs of movement. Rayne began suggesting a number of different spells that might be useful should they be attacked. Harry took note of them, glad she was still conscious. He knew nothing about spells to cure injuries, nor did he have any potions handy that might simulate the same effects.

Strangely, they didn't come across anyone on their way out. Harry was sure he heard footsteps close by, but each time he turned around with his wand pointed, there was no one there. Rayne said nothing as they followed the girl's directions down the right passage. The small door was easy to spot; the big brass knocker was in the shape of a winged skull with very long fangs. Harry raised it up and banged three times. The door swung open immediately upon the third knock, leading them into a small room that held, of all things, a lift.

Harry decided not to question their fortune. He doubted he would have been able to carry Rayne up a set of stairs by this point, and he'd been told more than once how dangerous it was to levitate someone when you didn't know the full extent of their injuries. Rayne was able to help herself into the lift while he stood on guard. Still, no one was coming after them. Rather than feel glad, Harry had the distinct feeling that something was wrong. He climbed into the lift with Rayne without another word, and slammed his fist against the button. The lift squealed and groaned as it sped upwards toward what Harry hoped was the surface.

Sure enough, the lift emptied out into a small alcove. Coming out into the main area, he realized they were back in Knockturn Alley! Upon closer inspection, Harry saw that they were not very far from where Rayne had parked her bike. Hoping against hope that it was still there, he helped her along as fast as he could. Rayne wasn't looking any better, and her eyelids kept fluttering closed like she was fighting to stay away. It seemed to take forever, but they finally made it.

"Rayne," Harry pleaded, handing her the helmet. "You have to help me drive. I don't know how to operate the bike!"

Rayne climbed in back of Harry, and pointed to a small switch on the right handle bar. Harry pressed it, and the bike roared to life. As it did, figures emerged out from every corner of each stand and shop all around. Harry watched in horror as the vampires closed in around them. They'd been waiting here for them all along! He wanted to curse himself for his stupidity; there was no need for them to chase after him if it were obvious where they'd go!

"It's about time," the Metamorphmagus vampire said, still giving off the appearance of Dudley.

Harry watched as he shapeshifted into a more imposing figure. This form was much taller and muscular; the face actually appeared handsome, almost refined. There was a glint of eagerness in his eye as he stood in front of them, blocking their path.

"I thought you two would never get here," he chortled. The voice was even different now, much thicker and deeper. "You're losing your touch, Rayne. I think the boy must be slowing you down!"

"He's no boy," Rayne said, raising up to stare at the vampire weakly. "And you can drop the act and the phony voice, Ned!"

There was about a half-second where time around the vampire named Ned seemed to freeze. As if watching a slow-motion reel, Harry saw the vampire shift forms to a much smaller body. This one was nowhere near as intimidating. Bone-thin and frail-looking enough that even Harry might have been able to snap him in two, Ned glared at her with all the air of a spoiled child having been caught doing wrong. Harry knew immediately that this must be the vampire's true form.

"My name is not Ned, Rayne!" he insisted, giving the ground a stomp. "Call me the Destroyer!"

Rayne chuckled against Harry's back. He saw that she wasn't alone, either. Several of the vampires were now snickering under their breaths, as if fighting back the urge to roll over and have hysterics. He himself was finding it hard to resist.

"Ned?" Harry wondered, glancing back at her. "Ned the Destroyer?"

"Yup! Ned the Destroyer," she said.

"Why don't you just shut your mouth, Rayne!" Ned, spat in a much higher and much, much more nasal voice. "None of this has anything to do with you. You aren't even supposed to be here now!"

Rayne just laughed dryly. "Oh, shut up, Destroyer," she drawled. "How long did it take you to come up with that name? Can't blame you much for the voice, though. But, hey! At least you tried!"

Harry wasn't sure whether he should laugh along with her or begin hexing everything in sight. By the look on Ned's face, the latter seemed like a reasonable option, yet Rayne sounded completely at ease. They weren't out of the woods yet, though. Harry was sure the vampires would attack at any second, no matter how much their mood might have improved!

"I can't get over what's happened to the vamps in this town," Rayne continued in a weak voice. "When I anointed your brother, Melvin, as Master of the City..."

Harry jerked his head in her direction, not sure if he'd heard right. "Melvin? There is a vampire leader named Melvin... who has a brother named Ned?"

Rayne bit her lip slightly to keep from laughing. Ned looked, if possible, even more infuriated.

"Melvin and Ned?" he repeated.

Rayne leaned in towards him. "Their mother was very vindictive," she explained.

"Obviously," Harry replied, watching Ned quiver with suppressed rage.

"Shut up!" Ned screamed, pulling his hair out in small tufts. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

Rayne abruptly leaned forward, and whispered in his ear. "When I squeeze your hip, gun the engine."

"You were always a thorn in my side, Rayne!" Ned declared, looking furious. "Always getting in the way of what I wanted! Well, now it's my turn to shine, and soon the whole world will bow down before my power. You have no idea what you've stumbled into this time!"

"You're going to shine a hell of a lot more than you realize," she countered, looking sure of herself. "At least I know one very important thing."

Ned paused. "What?"

"I know what time sunrise is."

Rayne squeezed his hip as hard as she could. Harry roared the motorcycle to life, and tried to keep it steady as they steered past a very shocked Ned and several other vampires. The bike was much more difficult to manage than a broomstick. The weight was all different, and Harry was finding it hard to keep the front wheel straight. Rayne reached around to help, and brought it to a stop once they were far enough away.

"It's in about two hours or so, baka!"

Harry pushed hard on the button to lift the bike in the air, as he and Rayne soared off out of Knockturn Alley towards the still-darkened sky. Below, the tiny little dots that made up the horde of undead were milling around like ants, racing back and forth in confusion. Harry turned hard and brought them around to head back away from central London, which had opened up before them as they passed through the enchantment barrier.

"That was fun," Rayne moaned, growing weak again. "But we need a place to hide. Any ideas?"

"Actually," Harry admitted, reluctantly. "There is one place..."

## Chapter 8

### Return to the Burrow

by Ri-kun

Harry had only been there once. It was around this time last year when the advance guard showed up to take him to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. At that point, the home had belonged to Sirius, who was lending it out to Dumbledore as headquarters to the Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore had told him during the reading of Sirius' will that the Order was temporarily evacuating from it. Since it was proven that Harry was in fact the true owner, they might have gone ahead and moved back in. Harry had said he didn't want it, but now both he and Rayne needed a place to stay. Somewhere that couldn't be detected, even by normal wizarding means. The place was said to be Unplotable, plus there were all sorts of added enchantments the headmaster had thrown in.

Which, of course, only left the question of whether Rayne could get in or not!

Harry had been let in by Dumbledore himself, who was Secret-Keeper. Only the Secret-Keeper could reveal the location to someone, or so he'd been told. Still, there was nowhere else in London they could escape to, and Harry doubted he could keep the bike steady long enough to fly back to Surrey. As it was, he and Rayne were having trouble working together. Harry was, at last, getting the hang of the controls. The handlebars still moved reluctantly, but he was getting better all the way to the street Number Twelve was on.

It was only by sheer luck that Rayne recognized the street Harry described to her. They dismounted together, Rayne having some difficulty about halfway. Her strength was almost gone by this point, and he was practically carrying her by the time they neared the steps. Stopping just short of them, Harry looked over at Rayne hopefully.

"Do you see it?" he asked, worriedly. "Between numbers Eleven and Thirteen! There's a big house with cracked windows."

Rayne looked up, and her eyes fluttered a bit. After a moment, they seemed to come into focus. "The name," she whispered. "Tell me the name of the place again. It's..."

"Number Twelve," he said, encouragingly. "Number Twelve Grimmauld Place!"

After a fashion, Rayne nodded. "Got it," she said, lowering her head. "I can see it now."

"Good! That's good."

The place was just as Harry remembered it. He was careful to leave his shoes at the door, so as not to wake the portrait of Sirius' long-dead shrew of a mother! The house was eerily silent, and gave off the impression that it'd been empty for several weeks. Rayne made it up the stairs with him, and collapsed down on the bed he'd once slept in the moment they reached it. He feared letting her fall asleep, but Rayne was out like a light before he could say a word. Harry checked her pulse and other vitals to make sure everything was still beating.

Everything seemed normal enough, though he wasn't entirely sure what qualified as normal. Still, she was sleeping soundly and appeared more or less fine. The bed next to hers called to him temptingly. Harry almost considered getting up to find another room, then wondered why he should bother. Taking his shoes off, he lay down and was asleep before his head touched the pillow.

Before he knew it, it was next morning. The sunlight strode through several cracks in the curtain fabric uninvitedly, hitting him directly in the eye. Harry rolled over and tried going back to sleep, but found himself far too wired. Looking over, he checked to see how Rayne was doing. At some point in the night, she'd turned over on her side. Her hair fell down across her face partially as if framing her for a portrait. Harry had never seen anything so worth waking up to in his entire life.

Getting to his feet, he quietly slipped his shoes on and wandered downstairs. It was odd being here now with none of the Order members for company. Last time, Fred and George had spent hours

at a time trying to spy on what their plans were, slipping Extendable Ears under the cracks in doors. Harry had about as many pleasant memories of this place as he did at Number Four Privet Drive! There just hadn't been enough time to really spend with Sirius. Also, Harry had been worried at that point that he might be expelled from Hogwarts for good. And then there was the fact that the Ministry was doing everything in it's power to make him look like a mentally unstable liar...

No, there weren't many good memories in this place. Somehow, though, Harry found himself feeling oddly at home nonetheless. It was not the same warm, happy feeling he got while crossing through the iron gates of Hogwarts. He didn't have the same thrill of joy at he did seeing Hagrid. And yet, the air tingled with a cool sense of inviting. Harry understood somehow, though he was at a loss to explain it, that he was safe here. It was perhaps another charm of the Black family house, designed to welcome the new owner upon his first arrival.

Feeling his stomach growl, Harry wandered downstairs to the kitchen, hoping to locate some food. Alas, it seemed that when the Order vacated, they took everything that could be considered valuable. At least in terms of edible substances! There wasn't so much as a crumb in the cupboards. The shelves were empty, and none of the pots or pans carried even the slightest smug of leftover sauce. There simply wasn't a bite to eat anywhere!

Harry's stomach moaned in protest. Finding nothing that could appease it, he instead went back upstairs to check on Rayne. She was awake when he knocked, and sitting up on her pillow. Some of the color had come back to her cheeks, but she still seemed like a long way from recovery in his opinion.

"Glad to see you're still here," she said, warmly. "When I woke up, I thought..."

"I just went downstairs for a second," he assured her. "I had hoped there might be some food here we could eat, but..."



"No such luck," she finished for him. "That's not a problem, really. In another day or two, I'll be well enough to travel and we can leave. In the meantime, there's just enough Muggle notes in a secret compartment on my bike to get us by with. When I feel up to it, we can go find a place to eat."

"I'll go," he said, standing. "Just tell me where the money is. What about you, though? Are you sure you should be sitting up?"

"I fine," she said, looking off in the distance. "In case you didn't hear what those vampires said, I'm not entirely normal!"

Harry thought this was a strange thing to say. "What does being half-Muggle have to do with you getting better?" he wondered.

Rayne stared. "You really haven't guessed, have you?"

At the sight of Harry's blank face, Rayne sighed and took a deep breath. "I'm a dhampir, Harry. We're... I'm, a creature that's spawned when a vampire mates with human. Dhampir aren't born very often. In fact, I don't think there's another one like me in the whole world at this point, but vampires hate us. Lots of dhampir throughout history became vampire hunters, simply because they were most capable of fighting them head-on."

"So, your mother was a witch?"

"My father," she said, shaking her head. "I never knew him, but people tell me he was a powerful wizard. He came to my mother's country years ago, looking for a de-aging potion that could be made from vampire blood. He wanted permission to experiment with some of my mother's brood, since she was the queen. They arranged it to where he would perform a powerful ritual spell that could create a fertility contract between any two beings. Not quite a year later, I was born. I had all of my mother's strengths and abilities, but none of her weaknesses. And all the magic of a witch!"

"That's why those vampires were after you," he said, realizing. "They knew you were a... dhampir? They knew what you were, and tried to kill you for it."

Rayne looked unbearable sad. "I'm so sorry I got you mixed up in my mess, Harry. If it weren't for me, you could have gone on with your life without any of this happening to you. I should've just stayed away like I intended!"

It was Harry's turn to shake his head. "Hagrid is one of my best friends at Hogwarts. He teaches Care of Magical Creatures, and is part giant. Last year, someone tried to have him fired, simply because they hated anything that wasn't fully human. Hagrid has this weird obsession with monsters. He's always trying to keep them as pets, and it usually ends in trouble, but I wouldn't have him any other way."

Harry smiled for a moment at the memory of the infamous Blast-Ended Skrewts. "An old friend of my mum and dad is a werewolf. He was bitten as a child, and has had trouble fitting in all his life. He was the first decent Defense Against the Dark Arts professor we ever had. I learned how to conjure a Patronus from him."

"People make fun of my friend Ron all the time, because he comes from a family of pure-blood wizards who's only crime was thinking that Muggles should be treated just like everybody else! My other friend, Hermione, gets teased by some of the Slytherins because her parents are Muggles, but it's really only because she's so much cleverer than they are! And I've caught more trouble than I can count just because I speak Parseltongue..."

Rayne's eyes widened. "You can speak Parseltongue?"

Harry froze. "Is there something wrong with that?" It almost sounded accusing, and he regretted it in the next instant.

Rayne just gave him a coy look. "Actually," she breathed, coming in close to his face. "I think it's very manly!"

They were inches apart now. The room grew oddly still, as if waiting in anticipation, as Harry gazed deeply into Rayne's eyes. She met his lips first, but it was Harry who pulled her in close with his arms. They were sitting rather uncomfortably on the bed. The angle was all wrong, so he shifted a little, which brought him down to lay alongside her.

Rayne tilted his chin up with her free hand, and gave a gentle sigh. Harry thought he might float off the bed. The moment had never felt more perfect to him!

The walls of the house suddenly trembled, as a noise from down below sounded. Harry pulled back in shock, looking around the room for unseen vampire Death Eaters attacking, but it was only someone pounding on the door. Unfortunately, the combination of noise and wall-rattling was sufficient to awaken Mrs. Black from her slumber!

"Mudbloods! Traitors! Shame of my flesh! Filth and disease..."

"What in the world is that?" Rayne wondered, covering her ears.

"Mrs. Black," he muttered. "Hold on just a sec!"

Harry raced down the wall to where Sirius' mother was hanging in her portrait. The curtains that normally kept her concealed were typically blown aside. Harry took aim with his wand and blasted them closed, silencing her at once. It occurred to him as he put his wand away, in his front pocket to avoid losing any buttocks, that he'd been doing an awful lot of underage magic recently. Harry's dealings with the Ministry had taught him that they used any excuse to make him look bad. And, of course, if you attracted the kind of trouble he did, what better way to bring him down than by imposing the Decree for the Unreasonable Restriction of Underage Magic! It had worked last year, after all.

He decided to worry about it later on, running as fast as his legs could carry him to open the door. There was too great a chance of them knocking again if he dilly-dallied, and Harry did not want to listen to Mrs. Black's portrait anymore than he had to. Which was one time too many already, in his opinion!

It had to be a member of the Order. No one else knew where this place was, or could even get in without permission from Dumbledore. That did not explain how Rayne could see it, but he wondered if it weren't the dhampir aspect of her. They'd never covered things like that before, so it wasn't entirely impossible! When he opened the door, wand at the ready just in case, there was no one there. Only a

single envelope, marked with his name, lay on the top step. Harry picked it up, turning it over in his hands as he did so, wondering all the while what this was about.

The Ministry would have sent an owl, as well any anyone else wishing to communicate with him by mail. With a pang, he realized that it'd been at least a day or so since he last saw Hedwig. Harry hoped she wasn't being mistreated, but then, the Dursleys tried as hard as they could to pretend she didn't exist, much as they did with him. Hedwig was a very smart owl, however, and had always taken good care of herself on her own. Assuring himself that she was fine, and would be seeing him soon, Harry tore open the letter.

It was just a single scrap of parchment. No name was signed to it, nor was there any indication of who it came from on the outside. The paper was rather dirty, and looked as if it had come from a sewer grate before being passed along to him. There were only five words scribbled in untidy handwriting across it.

She will betray you soon.

"Who was it?" Rayne asked, when he re-entered the room.

"Nothing," he lied, feeling the crumpled up note in his pocket. "Someone was banging on the door across from us. It shook the whole building, I think."

"Noisy neighbors," she mused. "Screaming portraits that shrill obscenities... This place has it all!"

"Right," he shook his head. "Home sweet home."

Rayne really was feeling better by later that afternoon. The two of them willed away the boring hours by playing games of Exploding Snap with a deck that Ron had left behind. In-between putting out fires on the bedsheets, the two discussed where they would go after this. Harry would have usually gone over to the Burrow by this point. One or more of the Order might arrange transport by broomstick. Since the Ministry was now believing his story, it might've been easier. He could have perhaps traveled by Floo Powder, assuming the

Dursleys allowed another set of wizards near their fireplace, which was highly unlikely!

Harry found he didn't want to leave, though. He was having fun just playing games with Rayne, talking with her about various things, and living in Grimmauld Place as though the rest of the world didn't exist. The heart-shaped stone they had liberated from the vampire hideout underground lay resting on a dresser near the portrait of Professor Phineas Nigellus, who had remained strangely silent the whole time they were there. Harry found this curious, but was grateful for the lack of added company. It was bad enough having to keep quiet so as to not awaken Sirius' mother once more. Rayne actually suggested at one point to blast the whole wall apart, since it really did seem like a Permanent Sticking Charm had been used to prevent her portrait from being moved. He had to admit it was tempting, but finally declined.

The lack of food was finally beginning to get to both of them, however. Harry's stomach had been rumbling for some time before Rayne finally conceded to let him go pick up something at a local market. With the promise that he'd be careful and hurry back soon, Harry slipped out the front door, pausing only to snatch the Muggle notes from Rayne's motorcycle. There was a market not far away, and before long, Harry had returned with enough food to last them the rest of the day. He and Rayne decided to eat down in the kitchen where it would be more comfortable, and even set out plates for themselves.

It was so odd, sharing a place like this. Harry had never thought of it before, or even what it might be like to live alone. The solitude was comforting after spending all the previous night fighting hordes of the undead. Rayne found this very funny, and laughed the whole time she sliced up melon for them to eat. It was good hearing her laugh; Harry could have sat there and survived on it and little else. His stomach felt otherwise, but it didn't get a vote.

"So, where will you go after this?" he asked, tentatively.

Rayne shrugged. "I haven't really thought about it. Usually I just drift from place to place, looking for work where I can."

He had been wanting to bring this up, but kept putting it off. Each time, it sounded silly in his head, no matter which way he worded it. This was really more of something Hermione was good at. Harry didn't have much experience, but he wanted Rayne to stay with him. Even if it was just a little bit longer.

"You could," he stammered, suddenly becoming very interested in his melon rine. "You could come with me. Stay for a little while, at least until I go off to Hogwarts again."

Rayne put her fork down and looked at him. "Harry..."

"It's just..." Nothing came to mind. Nothing he could think of might convince her to stay.

"Rayne," he finally said, looking her straight in the eye. "Please?"

Rayne looked at him for a moment, then stood up from her chair. Walking around the table, she took Harry in her hands by the temples and tilted his face up, until they were staring upside-down at one another. Without a word, Rayne took hold of his lower lip in her mouth. Harry felt electricity run through him, lifting his body up out of his seat to meet her. This wasn't like before, him floating as if on a cloud. There was power behind her kiss now; he could feel himself being lifted effortlessly from his chair. Harry kissed back with everything he had, hoping she didn't find him repulsive at it, and also hoping Rayne didn't inexplicably burst into tears afterwards, also!

"I'll stay with you for as long as you want me to, Harry," she whispered.

Harry felt himself being pushed around in his seat to where they faced one another properly. Rayne leaned his chair back, making Harry fall slightly over the table. He may have sat in his food, but it didn't matter. Rayne was kissing him again, letting her fingers trail through his hair and down his back as she did so. Harry returned the favor, and soon found himself supporting them both as she stretched out over on top of him. His heart hammered in his chest, everything

forgotten but what they were doing.

Rayne hadn't complained yet about his kissing so far, which struck him as a good sign. She had begun to play with the fabric on the front of his shirt, lightly scratching with her nails back and forth. It sent chills up and down his arms, but he never wanted her to stop.

There was the sound of something fluttering overhead, and a piece of parchment landed on top of Rayne's exposed backside. Harry glanced upward on instinct, and spotted a familiar-looking snowy owl resting on the nearest chair, watching them with a reproachful look in her eye.

"Hedwig!" Harry cried out, his mouth still connected with Rayne.

"Whab?" she asked, looking up. "Isn't that your owl?"

Hedwig was looking at them both rather haughtily, as though she'd caught them doing something horrible and wrong. When Harry moved to pet her, she immediately stuffed a head under her wing and refused to acknowledge him whatsoever. Rayne, meanwhile, freed the letter she delivered from the scattered remains of food on the table, and quickly set everything right after passing it onto him.

"You know an R.J. Lupin?" she asked. "Because that's who it's from!"

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling. "I know him!"

Dear Harry,

By this point, the entire Order of the Phoenix is looking for you. I know on Dumbledore's word that you have been staying at Grimmauld Place, and that you've invited someone in at your own discretion. Dumbledore has no qualms about this, much to my surprise, since the place is now yours to do with as you please. I will be arriving on the top step of Number Twelve at exactly five minutes past when this letter reaches you.

Remus Lupin

## Ex-Marauder

Harry frowned as he folded the letter up. The entire Order was looking for him, and Dumbledore somehow knew he had brought Rayne here to Number Twelve. He hadn't really thought about telling anyone where they were. Things had been rushing by so fast in the last few days that it slipped his mind. Indeed, in the back of his mind, he'd wondered about just staying here with her on his own, at least until school started back. It would have been nice to not be under constant surveillance all day and night.

None of that seemed to matter, though, because Dumbledore had figured out that they were here! Harry found himself growing slightly irked at the headmaster, and crumpled the letter up. Though he suspected it had been done with the best of intentions, Harry still didn't like the idea of being followed around. Hadn't he earned the right by this point to have a life of his own, outside of Voldemort and the prophecy?

Rayne must have seen that he was upset, for she reached out and put her arms around him. "Bad news?" she asked, lightly.

"Not really," Harry mused. "Just... an old friend of my parents coming by to see us. He said he'd be..."

There was a light knock at the door, followed by the sound of a latch opening on its own. "By," Harry finished, as very soft footsteps echoed down the stairs to the kitchen.

Professor Lupin strode in with a rather severe sort of smile on his face. Again, his clothes were patched and frayed, looking if possible even more worn than ever before. Harry noticed that it wasn't just his old teacher's clothing that looked tired. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his skin had gotten very sallow and pale. Professor Lupin's eyes were watery as they landed on Harry, still standing with Rayne draped around him.



Lupin sniffed the air once, and stared over at Rayne. A shocked sort of comprehension dawned on his face, and he stared from one to the other for several seconds without saying a word.

"Professor," Harry greeted, finding his voice a bit tight. Then, he added, "Come in."

That seemed to get Lupin's attention. "Forgive me, Harry," he said, weakly. "I suppose old habits are difficult to break. I keep thinking of this place as Sirius' old home, and the Order's headquarters. But, after all, it's passed onto your hands now, hasn't it?"

Harry felt his chest constrict tightly at the mention of Sirius. He thought he saw a flicker of something like pleasure in Professor Lupin's eyes for a brief second. It had occurred at the exact moment Lupin mentioned Sirius' name. Before he could think on it, though, Lupin went on.

"And who is your... friend?"

"Rayne," Harry said, looking up into her eyes. "This is Rayne. She helped me out a couple of times at Privet Drive."

"Yes, I heard about that!" Lupin said, and now his voice cracked under the strain of anger that could be heard underneath. "You really should've reported to the Order if anything strange was happening, instead of trying to handle things yourself!"

Harry knew he was being lectured, but it didn't surprise him. "The Order was watching," he counted, trying to keep his voice even. "They've been staked out at the Dursleys since I came home. Surely, they knew all about it."

"Even the Order cannot be everywhere at once!" Lupin insisted, but it sounded like a weak protest. "We've all been in a frightful panic since you left! Just what happened back there, anyway?"

Harry looked at Lupin in confusion. "I thought you knew!" he exclaimed. "There were vampires, and..."

"Vampires?!" Lupin interrupted. "In Surrey? Harry, are you sure about this?"

"They were going straight for him," Rayne broke in. She'd remained silent during their exchange, but now spoke up clearly. "I was there; I saw the whole thing happen! Harry fought them off by himself."

"You were there!" he reminded her, blushing. "I'd never have made it out if it weren't for you."

Rayne smiled, then looked back over to Professor Lupin, who now listened with keen interest. "At first, I was afraid it might have been because of me. I've had to deal with vampires before, so it made sense at first that they'd come gunning for me. But then, I thought about it. They'd really seemed more intent on getting to Harry than myself."

Lupin looked thoughtful for a moment. "Lord Voldemort never rallied with vampires before. During the First War, Dumbledore was afraid he'd try and recruit them. I believe he made several attempts, but they were always more content to remain neutral. Still, your mother's charm should have..."

Lupin froze.

"They probably just didn't want to take orders from a wizard," Rayne threw in. "Vampires don't like anyone that can use magic better than they can."

Something occurred to Harry, then. "I'm surprised he never tried to become a vampire himself! Voldemort was always looking for a way to become immortal, from what I've heard!"

Rayne shook her head quickly. "It would never have worked, Harry," she said, grimly. "Vampires, however ageless, aren't truly immortal! If a wizard is brought over and becomes one of the undead, they lose all touch with their magic. A wand in the hands of a vampire creature is just a very elaborately-crafted stick, and totally worthless."

"Oh," was all he could say. That would have definitely kept him from making the change!

"Harry," Lupin said, suddenly. "Would you mind if I had a word with you in private?"

Harry started to say that he'd rather Rayne remained in the room with them, but she quickly let go and backed away. "You go on, Harry," she said, calmly. "I'll just clean up in here."

"Are you sure?" he asked, taking her by the hand.

Rayne gave it a squeeze, but then let go. "I'm sure," she said. "Go on! Don't worry, I'll still be here."

Harry followed Lupin upstairs into the drawing room. Once there, the professor quickly waved his wand around to shut the doors behind them, before turning to face Harry directly. Harry straightened his back and looked as calmly as he could back at him. This felt oddly reminiscent of the time in his third year when Lupin had scolded him for possessing the Marauder's Map. Snape had nearly expelled Harry for it, but Lupin got him out of it in the end. Now, Remus Lupin was looking over at Harry with a very similar look in his eye. Though, Harry realized, not so far down as before. It seemed he had done some growing since then. Now, Professor Lupin was having to look him directly in the eye.

"Harry..." he began, sternly, but words exploded out of Harry's throat before he could stop them.

"I didn't do anything wrong," he began clearly. "I went back to Privet Drive just like Dumbledore wanted me to. I don't know how vampires were able to attack me, but they did. And Rayne saved my life more than once, so I know I can trust her. We came back here because I'd told Professor Dumbledore that he could use this place as the Order's headquarters again if he wanted to. I was expecting to find someone here!"

Harry paused, then. "Why isn't anyone here?"

"Most of the Order is out trying to circumvent Voldemort's advances," Lupin said, after a moment's silence. "Now that the Ministry has finally decided to admit that he's back, Voldemort sees no need in keeping a low profile. Things are being stretched to the limit now; we've even had to pull several members away from guarding you. I suppose that was when the vampires decided to attack. But still, Harry! You shouldn't have run off like that."

There was no point in arguing. Harry wasn't going to say a word against what his old professor insisted was true, but that didn't mean he agreed with him. Lately, everyone in the Order seemed to think he deliberately sought out trouble! Thinking of something else to change the subject with, a thought occurred to him.

"Speaking of the Ministry," he said, very quickly. "Why haven't they come after me yet?"

Lupin stared at him. "What do you mean?" he asked, cautiously.

"I did a lot of underage magic when those vampires came for me. How come they haven't dragged me back to the Wizengamot for trial?" Harry could still remember vividly sitting before the jury of witches and wizards, worrying that he'd never see Hogwarts again. The thought caused a great bitterness in his stomach. He still blamed Cornelius Fudge for it all, since the Minister of Magic had been intent for so long to deny Voldemort ever coming back!

"Harry," Lupin said gently, catching the anger in his eyes. "The Ministry, if anything, is worse off than we are. They've been pushed to the very brink and beyond, trying to catch up on what Voldemort is doing. If ever there was a time for underage wizards to do spells outside of Hogwarts, it is now! Most of the Improper Use of Magic office personnel have been transferred over to other areas. Scrimgeour seems to think that..."

"Who?" Harry wondered.

"Oh, right!" Lupin said, then reached into a deep coat pocket. "You've been out of the loop for several days now, I suppose, so the news wouldn't have reached you! Fudge has been sacked! An emergency

recall election ballet has put the former head of the Auror office in charge."

"Really? What's he like?"

Professor Lupin looked distant for a moment. "I suppose he makes a far better candidate than Fudge would. Rufus Scrimgeour took control of the Auror office shortly after Mad-Eye Moody retired. I haven't heard much about him, good or bad, but he seems qualified for the job!"

"At least he isn't denying anything," Harry mused.

"Not concerning the fact that Voldemort has returned, at least!" Lupin nodded. "But the Daily Prophet hasn't reporting anything whatsoever on your disappearance. I cannot believe for a second that the Ministry doesn't know that you've vanished off radar, Harry."

Harry felt another lecture coming on, but kept quiet. "I was told by Molly Weasley before leaving to bring you back to the Burrow straightaway," Lupin added, changing the subject. "She said that if I failed to, I would be expected to answer to her!"

Harry looked at him. "I guess I could leave, then," he said, fighting the urge to grin. "No need in making anyone suffer needlessly! And I'd hate to see a grown werewolf cry after Ron's mum was done with him!"

Lupin tried to appear put out, but it wasn't working. Frankly, he seemed relieved that Harry was being cooperative!

"As long as Rayne can come with," he added.

Lupin sighed in consent. "I cannot guarantee she can stay with you at the Burrow," he warned. "That will be up to her and Arthur."

"Fine," he nodded, readily.

"There is something else I feel I should tell you, Harry." Lupin sounded very grave, now; as if he were getting ready to drop some

terrible news that would crush Harry's spirit. "Your friend... Rayne, she isn't quite what you might think. In fact, she's..."

"I know Rayne is a dhampir," Harry finished quickly for him. "I've know for a little while now. She told me."

Professor Lupin looked surprised. "She... that is, you know..."

"That Rayne is part vampire herself, yes. And before you can say another word, it doesn't bother me. I don't care that Rayne isn't fully human anymore than I care that Hagrid is part-giant. Or that you're a werewolf," he added, pointedly. "Rayne is my friend, and nothing else matters."

There was a pause, in which neither said a word. Lupin seemed horrified by what Harry had said, but wasn't looking him in the face. He found this very strange, and almost remarked on it. Before he could open his mouth, though, Lupin was speaking again.

"Really, Harry! You should go now. I understand you might want to remain here a bit longer, but it would be better for everyone if you go somewhere where other people can look out for you."

He almost protested, but reined himself in. "We'll get our things together. Actually," he thought. "There's not much here for us to take!"

"Your things were brought over to the Burrow from your aunt and uncle's home," Lupin assured him. "Arthur picked them up for you. I believe they'd taken to dumping your trunk out on the sidewalk next to the garbage cans."

"Sounds like them!"

Harry and Rayne quickly cleared what little there was away, and made sure to promise Professor Lupin that they'd travel straight to the Burrow without stopping. The professor had been anxious when Harry told him they'd be travelling by motorcycle, but Rayne wouldn't hear of leaving it by the side of the road. As it turned out, she knew

the way to Ottery St. Catchpole, so he was spared from admitting not knowing the way.

Hopping on back, they drove off down the road far enough out of sight before lifting into the air. It was a fairly uneventful trip there, in fact. Nothing out of the ordinary occurred, save for one moment when Rayne couldn't resist buzzing low over a herd of sheep out in the countryside. Harry was content to wrap his arms around her waist. He even risked leaning forward a little to rest a cheek on her back, which was warm against the unnatural chill hanging in the air.

Harry kept his wand at the ready, just in case. His hand twitched several times, itching to use it. They'd been attacked so many times in the last few days, it felt odd now to have this quiet moment of peace. At the same time, however, a restlessness was quickly growing in the small of his chest. It felt more than once like a roaring beast was getting ready to come charging out of him. No matter how hard Harry tried to keep it down, it wouldn't stay quiet. Something was growing in him, and wanted out badly. What frightened him the most, thought, was how it seemed directed at Rayne!

Finally, the ground below began feeling familiar to him. Harry spotted the Burrow up ahead, with its mismatched rooms that appeared to have been stitched together by magic, and held only in place the same way! The hens in front went wild as Rayne landed her bike among them, sending them all scattering with cackles of alarm. Once safely on the ground and at a full stop, they each pulled their helmets off and dismounted. By now, it was late in the evening, and the shadow cast by the Weasley home meant that they were more or less walking uphill in the dark.

When they reached the front door, Harry paused for a moment before knocking. Swallowing the uncomfortable lump in his throat, he gave the door several hard taps, and waited. Rayne placed a hand reassuringly on his shoulder, before stepping off to the side. A moment later, the door swung open. Instead of Mrs. Weasley, however, a bushy-haired girl came flying out to throw her arms around his neck.

"Harry!" Hermione squealed. "Where have you been all this time?! Oh, it's wonderful to see you! Professor Lupin sent word that you were on your way, and that you'd explain everything then. What's all this talk about vampires in Surrey, though? I thought you were safe at your aunt and uncle's place. I mean, I assumed that Dumbledore had added all sorts of enchantments to protect you there, but how could vampires possibly get through?! You weren't doing something wreckless again, were you?"

"Hermione," Ron said irritably. "Let him breathe a minute!"

But the moment Hermione pulled away, Ron threw his own arms around him. Harry stood there for several uncomfortable seconds, not sure of how to respond. Ron had never been this friendly before. When he pulled away, Harry saw a look of unbridled relief in his eyes.

"You really had us all going there, mate!" he said, running a hand through his flaming red hair. "We were worried you might have gone off to fight Death Eaters on your own, or something. Turns out, you were just getting a new wardrobe! Nice clothes, by the way. Did you raid Bill's closet, or something?"

"Ron!" Hermione scolded, but then Ginny stepped up.

Harry met her eyes for a moment, unsure of what to say. It looked as if she might have been crying at some point, but when Harry moved to explain things, all she did was pull him in close and throw her arms around him.

"We were all scared," she whispered in his ear. "We thought..."

Now, the guilt hit him. Harry felt as though the earth should swallow him up right then and there as punishment. All of his friends were standing in a huddle around the door, looking at him expectantly.

"Harry," Ginny said, pointing off to the side. "Who's this?"

"Oh!" Harry had completely forgotten about Rayne for a second. Taking her hand, he dragged her forward into the light of the doorway. Rayne followed reluctantly, but raised up when she was standing



before them. Everyone's eyes grew about twice the size of saucers, and a cold silence fell over the air that had nothing to do with the evening chill. Ron, of course, was the first one to say anything!

"Bloody hell, mate!" he swore, gaping. "You've got a new girlfriend, and she's part veela!"

## Chapter 9

### Family and Phlegm

by Ri-kun

Ron received a very sharp look from both Ginny and Hermione for his remark. Harry found himself dragged into the Burrow with Rayne trailing along slowly behind. No one else seemed to notice she was really there, so he quietly took her by the hand and helped her along to catch up. Once they reached the kitchen, it was pandemonium all over again. Mrs. Weasley was in there, along with her oldest son Bill, who's hair had somehow gotten even longer. They both turned at the same time as Harry entered. Mrs. Weasley looked as if she were about to say something scolding to her son, but changed her expression at once upon seeing Harry.

The dish she'd been holding in her hands clattered to the floor, sending soapy water flying everywhere. Bill gave Harry a knowing grin as Mrs. Weasley threw her arms around him in a suffocating bear hug. Harry kept a firm grip on Rayne's hand the whole time, causing her to twist it at an awkward angle. Rayne pulled free, but remained close by as Mrs. Weasley continued to restrict his lungs.

"Come on, mum!" Bill said, standing. "Let him breathe for a minute."

"Oh, Harry!" Mrs. Weasley gasped, pulling back. "We'd heard you were coming, but... Honestly! Whatever possessed you to run off like that?! And in the middle of everything that's happened! We were all imagining such terrible things. I kept trying to bewitch the clock to where it would give us some idea of where you'd gone, but I don't think it can be changed that way once it's set!"

Harry glanced over and saw that Molly Weasley's ever-reliable clock had since grown a new needle, one that carried Harry's name on it. The hand seemed to be having trouble pinpointing exactly where he was, however, for it kept shooting around from 'Work' to 'School' and then back to 'Traveling'. The other Weasley hands were set directly on 'Mortal Peril'.

"It stays like that all the time," she told him, noticing where he was staring towards. "Of course, I guess none of us are safe at this point. But, come Harry! You must be starving half to death at this point. Remus told us you were hid out at Grimmauld Place, and I know there couldn't have been anything worth eating!"

It was then that Molly seemed to notice that Harry hadn't arrived alone. She stepped right in front of Rayne, paused as though shocked to find someone standing there, and blinked. Ron could be heard snickering somewhere behind Hermione, well out of her reach. Bill looked at Harry from the corner of his eye, and gave a sly sort of conspiratorial grin.

"Oh... hello." Molly's voice suddenly began very formal. "I'm terribly sorry. I wasn't aware..."

Molly looked back towards Harry, her eyes begging for an explanation. "Her name is Rayne," he said quickly. "She helped me escape from Privet Drive when the vampires attacked."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes grew big. "So, there really were vampires, then? I'd hoped Remus was just exaggerating when he wrote to us and said... Well, in either case, please sit down, dear! I'll have something for the both of you soon enough."

"Actually," Rayne started. "I really should be..."

Harry just shook his head at her. He'd known Ron's mum for far too long now, and there was no way she'd ever let someone leave without being fed. Plus, Harry had a growing suspicion that Mrs. Weasley wanted to know more about his new friend and savior. She kept looking Rayne's way as she waved her wand back and forth throughout the kitchen, making things flying around wildly. Her movements were a bit more haphazard than he was used to. The knives she charmed to chop potatoes with were hacking away as if they'd done her some serious wrong, and twice, Molly had to relight the fire underneath her cauldron, sending flames out all around it.

Nevertheless, when she finally placed an enormous bowl of stew in front of them both, it was every bit as good as Harry remembered!

"Now then, Harry," she said, taking a seat across from Bill. "We've got your room upstairs all set up. You can sleep in Fred and George's old room; Arthur's already brought your trunk and other things up, so you're all set."

"Thank you," he mumbled over a mouthful of stew. "Sorry about..."

But Molly quickly motioned with her hands. "Nevermind about that, dear. We're just all grateful that you're safe. Thanks to you, by the way, for taking such good care of him for us all!"

Rayne looked sheepishly over his shoulder. "Actually," she admitted, taking the time to swallow first. "Harry saved me more than once. I probably wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for him."

"Typical," he thought he heard Ron mutter.

Mrs. Weasley glared over Harry's head. "Well," she went on, after a moment of absolute silence. "Why don't you spend the night here with us? It's getting much too late for anyone to travel in these trying times. The Ministry's already been sending out flyers, warning people not to leave their homes after dark."

"I couldn't..." she began, but Molly was insistent.

"Straight up the stairs and down the hall to the right. No one's slept in there for over almost two years now, so you should be fine. It's probably still got some of..." Mrs. Weasley paused. Harry knew she was talking about Percy Weasley's old room, and the fact that much of his things were still lying around.

"Now," she said, after a moment. "Why don't the two of you go on and get some rest. I dare say you'd need it after everything that's happened. Go on! The lot of you!"

Rayne followed Harry up to his room, and paused in the spot where her room for the night was. Harry could remember Percy sticking his head out to complain about the noise shortly after Harry had arrived.

That had been before the Quidditch World Cup and Voldemort's return; a lifetime ago now, it seemed.

"I guess I'll see you in the morning," she said, slowly.

There was a moment's hesitation, during which neither of them seemed in a hurry to leave. Finally, Rayne leaned in and gave him a warm, slow kiss on the cheek, just inches from where his mouth was. Harry turned into her, but she'd already pulled back.

"Tomorrow," she promised, before closing the door behind her.

Harry moved on to the twin's bedroom further down the hall. He'd never been in here before, though it looked to have seen its fair share of excitement through the years. There were numerous burn marks on the walls, and unidentifiable stains covering the floor in places. Even the furniture hadn't escaped damage! All of it was cracked and chipped in places, as though it'd been put through the mill more than once. No doubt all of this was due to the twins' experimenting. According to Ginny, they'd been making things for their joke shop in secret for years. All the damage was a silent testimony to their success. He hoped the joke shop was going well, if only for their sakes.

Harry lay down across the bed and waited patiently. There was the sound of scraping out in the hallway, and a brief period of quiet, followed by a small scuffle. Just as it fell silent again, he called out in the dim light.

"You can come in now! The door's open."

A loud thud echoed through the door before it swung open. Ron was clutching his side in pain, and wearing a very put-out expression. Ginny was holding her fist as if it ached slightly, but had a satisfied expression on her face. Only Hermione seemed uninjured, at least physically. She was looking over at Harry in a very disapproving sort of way, though, rather like the numerous times she'd caught him and Ron doing something they weren't supposed to.

"So?" Ginny was the first to speak.

Harry grin sort of cheekily, and feined ignorance. "So, what?"

The outburst that followed was loud enough to wake the house ghouls upstairs, who promptly began banging around in the attic in protest.

"Where did she come from?"

"How did you meet her?"

"Is she really part veela?"

"Did she just show up at your house one day, just like that?"

"Harry, are you sure she's not working for You-Know-Who?"

"She doesn't have the Dark Mark on her," he told Hermione, assuringly. "In fact, I'm not so sure she has any sort of marks on her!"

"How do you know that, mate?" Ron pressed, his eyes narrowing.

Harry just grinned, grateful that the room was dim. "Guess!"

No one was looking at him now, except for Ginny. She seemed totally unfazed by his sudden bawdiness, and even shared a knowing look with him for a brief second, before Ron caught it and glared.

"Ginny," he said loftily, clearing his throat. "Why don't you go downstairs and help mum for a bit. Hermione and I need to talk with Harry, you know... About important stuff."

"Oh, blow off!" she retorted, bravely. "Mum doesn't need my help with anything. The only thing there is to do in the kitchen is listen to her rant at Bill!"

"Your mum is still trying to get him to cut his hair?" Harry asked, curious. "I thought she'd have given up by now."

"That's not why she's jumping down his throat," Ginny interjected, before Ron could say more. "It's all on account of Phlegm!"

"Phlegm? Who's..."

"She means Fleur," Hermione said quickly. "You know, from the Triwizard Tournament! She's been staying here at the Burrow since term ended."

"She went home for a couple of days to make plans with her parents for the wedding, thankfully, but we got a letter this morning saying she was on her way back. Apparently," and Ginny's nose wrinkled. "She's planning to spend the remainder of the year abroad with us, to learn more about our customs!"

Harry blinked at this. "Wait? Did you just say 'wedding?'"

"Didn't I tell you?!" Ron exclaimed. "Bill and Fleur are getting married! They've set the date for next summer, just in time for us to get out of school. She's asked for Ginny and her little sister to be bride's maids!"

"That's great!" Harry began, but a quick look at Hermione and Ginny's faces told him otherwise.

"What's wrong?"

"Mum isn't too happy about it," Ginny told him. "She's been spending all her time with Bill while Fleur was gone, trying to talk him out of it. She thinks he's rushing into things, not thinking very clearly. Frankly, for once, I think mum's got the right idea!"

"She's not so bad," Ron began, quietly. "I like her."

"Only because you get all swoony and thick-headed when she walks into a room!"

Harry looked over at Ron, who was doing his best to avoid eye contact with everyone. "So, she still gets you with that veela thing of hers? I thought living with her would make you immune, or something."

"It does!" he said, quickly. "But every now and then, if you're not careful..."

"It's been terrible here!" Ginny cut in, angrily. "All she ever does is prance around like she's the most important thing in the world, making snide comments about things, and talking about who all should be invited to her wedding, or cut from the list! And you're not getting out of this, Harry!" Ginny added, quickly. "She's been saying for weeks now that you're to be her guest of honor, seeing as how you saved her little sister's life and all."

Harry hadn't actually saved Gabrielle's life, but Ginny didn't give him a chance to point that out. "All she's said since we learned that you'd disappeared was that she hoped you were found soon, or else their wedding plans would be ruined. I've been biting back the urge to hit her for days!"

"Harry," Hermione cut in. "Where did you go off to? And why couldn't you write to us? We were all worried sick out of our minds!"

"Yeah, mate," Ron added, looking down at the ground. "We all figured you might have gone off to face Voldemort alone. I was thinking that, well... After what happened to Sirius, I mean..."

Realization hit him. "You thought I went off to get killed, did you?"

No one met his face, completely. Not even Ginny! "I'm fine," he told him, seriously. "I mean, I guess I am."

Everyone looked like they didn't believe him. Harry wasn't sure if he could explain how he was feeling, especially about Sirius. The pain was still alive in him, yet had somehow deaded a bit. He wasn't sure really if he'd ever be okay. And so much had happened, of course! There'd been the Patronus in the alley, for example, which he quickly gave an abbreviated explanation of.

"Your Patronus changed, Harry?!" Hermione gasped. "But I've read that only happens in extremely rare circumstances."



Harry shrugged, thinking back to what Rayne said. "I think it's done it because of Sirius dying. The Patronus wasn't a stag this time; it was a kind of big dog. I haven't cast the spell again since, so it might go back to the way it was."

"Harry, are you sure... well, how do you know Rayne isn't really working for You-Know-Who?"

Harry looked up at Hermione. "I trust her," he said simply. "Isn't that a good enough reason? Why are you so sure she can't be?"

"Harry," she began, and he had the feeling she was gearing up for something big. "You disappeared for days, and before that, there's all these reports about horrible things happening everywhere. No one can get hold of you, and we keep wondering if you've been taken captured. It's just really strange that she appeared at your house that way."

"It's not my house," he reminded her. "And I doubt my aunt and uncle will let me come back there, charm or no charm!"

"What's that got to do with anything?" Ron wondered. "What charm?"

The air froze in Harry's lungs. He'd let the truth slip without thinking; none of his friends knew the true secret behind why he had to return to Privet Drive each year for a time. He'd left off telling them that, because it felt like revealing this would only lead to revealing the whole truth about the prophecy. Harry spend several minutes debating between himself about whether he should say any more. Finally, he gave in.

"It's why I have to go back to Privet Drive," he began, raising up on the bed. "Something Dumbledore did, on account of my mum. When she died saving me, it put a protection around me."

"We know that, Harry," Hermione started.

"Yeah, but there's more. Dumbledore completed the charm by sending me to live with my aunt. It was her blood, see? My mum and

Aunt Petunia both share the same blood, so it was the only place I'd be safe from Voldemort!"

"Don't say his name!" Ron hissed, but everyone ignored him.

"Go on, Harry," Ginny said, reassuringly.

"I have to go back there every year," he continued. "Until I turn seventeen, when the spell finally breaks. Voldemort isn't supposed to be able to touch me while I'm there; that's why Dumbledore always insisted I go back."

Harry paused. "He also told me something else. Something to do with the prophecy we found in the Department of Mysteries."

All eyes were on him, now. "It was about me," he began, his voice sounding thick to him. "Me and Volde... You-Know-Who! Professor Trelawney was the one who made it, but I don't think she realizes it."

And Harry began to relay to them everything he remembered Dumbledore saying: about the time of his birth coensiding with Neville Longbottom's, and now Neville had almost become the Boy Who Lived. About how he either had to kill Voldemort himself, or die in the attempt.

"...Because neither of us can live," Harry finished quoting. "While the other survives."

"But," Ron stammered. "But, the prophecy was destroyed! We all saw it smash against those stone steps!"

"Dumbledore was the one it was given to," Harry explained. "He rememberd all of it, and showed it to me in his Pensieve."

"So, you've got to go and fight You-Know-Who by yourself in the end," Ron finished, looking impressed. "Makes sense, I suppose. I mean, we all figured something like that was going to happen eventually. At least, I did!"

"Ron, quit being so insensitive!" Hermione scolded. "This is serious!"

"You really are what they're saying in the Daily Prophet, then?" Ginny questioned. "You really are the Champion!"

Harry shrugged, looking away. "I suppose."

Nobody said anything for several minutes afterwards. The weight of news Harry had brought with him had driven all into a deep, reserved mood. Harry found his mind wandering over things he hadn't bothered thinking about for almost a month now. He was alone in this, and might die in the attempt. No one else could do it, and that left it on his shoulders. He had often wondered why, privately. Why had this fallen to him of all people?

It didn't seem fair.

"Oh!" Hermione spoke up, making everyone jump. "I almost forgot! Our O.W.L.s are supposed to come tomorrow. We'll finally find out what classes we'll be able to take!"

Ron shook his head. "She's been talking about nothing else for weeks," he said to Harry, grinning. "Come on, Hermione! We all know you're going to pass everything. You've got nothing to worry about!"

"Says you, Ronald," she scowled. "But, really. We should think about what we're going to do when school starts. What classes we take could be very helpful later on." Hermione said this with a very meaningful look in her eye. "We are doing the DA this year, right? I mean, it'll be very important, not to mention helpful with our grades!"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. He hadn't given any thought to it. "Do we really need one? Who's going to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year?"

"No idea!" Ron shrugged. "But no matter who it is, I really agree with Hermione on this one. No teacher is going to be able to show us what we need to know. We need somebody who's got experience!"

"Plus," Ginny added. "With Umbridge gone, it'll be a lot easier for us to meet! You should start thinking about what we're going to cover."

I'm definitely going to show up, even though I've got O.W.L.s this year."

Harry allowed himself to debate the issue as the rest of them fell into a comfortable mood. As they all began talking with each other, he found himself listening closely to the next room, wondering if Rayne could hear them. He had been secretly hoping that she'd come out and join them. The room felt strange to him without her in it. Time passed, and no one came in to join them, not even Mrs. Weasley. Apparently, she was giving Bill the third degree on his decision to get married.

"I'm avoiding mum as much as I can until this is over with," Ginny told him. "It's been a nightmare here! I almost wish I'd been out fighting vampires with you. That'd be much better than having to deal with what's going on here!"

"Talking of mum," Ron broke in. "She wanted to know what you'd think of having a ceremony for Sirius on your birthday."

"See!" Hermione jumped in. "There's not going to be a funeral, even though the Ministry finally admitted to him being innocent. Mrs. Weasley thought you'd like to have a party here with everyone, but also wanted to have a minute or two of silence."

"Nothing really fancy," Ron added. "Just... thought you'd like a minute to say, you know, goodbye!"

"She insisted we ask you first," Ginny added, as if apologizing.

Harry thought about it for a moment, and nodded. "Okay," he said. "That's fine."

The evening finally came to a close several hours later, when Mrs. Weasley called up from the bottom of the steps for them to go to bed. Reluctantly, everyone left the room, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts. No sound was coming from Rayne's room, indicating that she'd gone to sleep. Harry kept an ear close to the wall, hoping to hear some sign from her, but finally drifted off. His dreams were very confusing, with red balls being bounced around everywhere, while a

parade full of vampires in broad daylight marched down the street. And a little girl began pulling on his Hogwarts robes, warning him to stay out of the street, or else he would die.

Harry woke up near sunrise in tangled sheets that were soaked with sweat. His eyes burned from a lack of sleep, even though he couldn't remember waking up before. Just before the light streamed through the open window, he had the strangest feeling that something was watching him. When he got up to check, however, there was nothing there. Just for a moment, though, he scar gave off a brief twinge. It was gone as quickly as it began, leaving him wondering whether he'd imagined it.

## Chapter 10

### Sirius Remembered

by Ri-kun

Fleur did indeed arrive the next morning. Mrs. Weasley greeted her rather coolly as she drifted through the front door to greet Bill with a warm kiss. Arthur Weasley was a bit more welcome with her, but Harry noticed he too seemed stiff around them. None of the Weasley family was very happy about the engagement, he could see.

Arthur was surprised to find Rayne there, but quickly extended a hand in welcome. Harry was glad to see at least one person he knew not treat her with suspicion. Ron and Hermione's questions about her the previous night had left him wondering if she would be able to stay here. Mr. Weasley simply nodded when Harry explained the situation to him, and granted his blessing to stay. He was quite shocked to hear of the recent development at Surrey, but didn't stick around to hear the full version of events.

"I'm terribly sorry, Harry!" he said, munching on a bit of toast as he dashed out the front door. "But it's been madness at the office recently, and I really can't stay. You can fill me in this evening when I get home. I've insisted on taking Friday evening off so we can celebrate your birthday! There'll be time to talk then."

Harry had completely forgotten about his birthday. Mrs. Weasley assured him it would be no trouble whatsoever, and even asked him who he would like to come. The first person that came to mind was Rayne. He had no idea how long she was going to be staying here, and hadn't gotten the nerve up to ask. Mrs. Weasley began naming off people Harry knew, including Professor Lupin, Hagrid, Tonks, and several others. Mad-Eye Moody, she explained, was far too busy at the moment. He'd been called back into active duty by the Ministry to help train new Aurors. That, and the work he did for the Order, left him with little to no free time.

"Yeah," Ron added. "And besides that, you wouldn't want him showing up anyway. He'd insist on jinxing all your gifts to make sure there weren't any booby traps!"

Mrs. Weasley glared at him, and while her back was turned, Harry had a funny vision of Mad-Eye dive-bombing the cake Mrs. Weasley said she was baking to search it for a concealed basilisk egg. It took him a minute to calm down enough and whisper to Rayne what was so funny. By the time he was finished, however, she was doubling over in her seat with laughter.

Hermione, meanwhile, had been watching the windows like a starved hawk all morning. Each time something moved outside, even as small as a morning bird passing by, she jumped up out of her seat and dashed over to it, only to sit down a moment later with a very morose look on her face. She'd been anxious about the O.W.L.s since they woke up, and the strain showed all over her face.

Ron was taking his time eating breakfast, so as to enjoy the show. When he finally couldn't hold his laughter in any longer, Hermione responded by getting up and leaving the room. Their eyes met for just a moment as she stormed out, and Ron caught the exchange. Pretending to not care, he attacked his sausages with a ferocious vigor worthy of Fluffy the three-headed dog! Harry sighed, and rose to his feet, giving Rayne an apologetic look on his way out. Hermione was sitting down in the drawing room in a chair far to the corner. She didn't look up as Harry approached, but began speaking as soon as he got near enough.

"Hermione..."

She cut him off before he could continue, however. "Oh, come off it, Harry!" she spat. "We both know he meant every bit of it!"

Harry felt very confused. "What's wrong?" he wondered, hoping that asking wouldn't lead to a row, because Hermione looked ready for one.

"I'm just so sick of him!" she growled. "All he ever talks about is his precious Phlegm; about how her hair shines, how her eyes glimmer in

the moonlight, how her feet don't seem to really touch the ground as she glides effortlessly through the room!"

Harry didn't think that sounded like Ron at all. "Are you sure you aren't talking about Bill?"

He'd meant it to be funny, but the look she shot at him silenced the laughter in his throat. "All Ron ever does is follow her around like a sick puppy. Ginny thinks it's sad too, in case you didn't know. And then, last night, all he wanted to talk about was Rayne!"

"Rayne!?" Harry wondered. What had Ron said about her? Then, something else struck him. "Hang on a second. When were you and Ron talking last night? I thought you both went to bed after you left my room."

Hermione didn't answer, but he thought he saw a bit of red creep up her neck. Before Harry could press the issue any further, Rayne called to him from the kitchen. "Harry," she shouted. "You've got mail!"

"It's our O.W.L.s, mate!" Ron said, racing into the room. "Hermione's came, too!" he added, almost as an afterthought.

Hermione snatched hers from his hand at once, and nearly tore the envelope in half trying to get to it. Ron and Harry each took their time opening theirs. Harry was suddenly feeling extremely nervous. He'd been doing his best all last year to try and get top grades, so as to begin a career as an Auror after Hogwarts. He now felt very empathetic towards Hermione's anxiety. Sighing, Harry unfolded the letter and perused the top part, after receiving a nod of good luck from Rayne.

Hogwarts School

of

Witchcraft and Wizardry

Ordinary Wizarding Level



## Results

Passing Grades Failing Grades

Outstanding -- O Poor -- P

Exceeds Expectations -- E Dreadful -- D

Acceptable -- A Troll -- T

Harry James Potter

Astronomy P

--

Care of Magical Creatures E

--

Charms O

--

Defense Against the Dark Arts O

--

Divination A

--

Herbology E

--

History of Magic D

--

Potions O

--

Transfiguration E

--

It is my duty as head of Gryffindor house to inform you that you've been nominated for the title of Gryffindor Quidditch Captain.

Congradulations!

Sincerely,

Deputy Headmistress,

Minvera McGonagal

Harry gulped, and looked over his grades to make sure he hadn't read them wrong. Failing Astronomy was no big loss, especially considering how the exam had been interrupted halfway through by Umbridge's attempts to have Hagrid arrested. Harry still felt the occasional surge of anger at the injustice of it, despite the fact that she failed miserably, and was dragged off into the Forbidden Forest not long after! Plus, having passed Care of Magical Creatures with an Exceeds Expecations only served to credit Hagrid in the end. Though, Harry mused silently, he was seriously considering not taking the subject this year! There had been enough adventures there to last him a lifetime.

Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts, he'd both received an Outstanding in. That put him one step closer to his goal of being an Auror. Divination, he could live without, but Herbology, he couldn't afford to let go, no matter how many times Professor Sprout made them work with the Venemous Tentaclua. And it was no short of relief to Harry knowing that he'd never have to put up with Professor Binns droning voice again.

What truly shocked him, however, was that he'd passed his Potions grade with such flying colors. There seemed to be something to that, though he couldn't guess at what. Perhaps, he reasoned, it had all been on account of the lack of Professor Snape in the room. Even Neville, he remembered, had been more at ease, and turned in a passable result by the end. Still, something worried him about it, enough that he couldn't truly enjoy coming out of Transfiguration with an Exceeds Expectations. Had Dumbledore somehow...

"What did you get, Harry?" Ron pressed, leaning over his shoulder.

Harry pulled back a little, and grinned. "Not until I see yours!"

Ron looked put out, but reluctantly handed over the parchment with his grades on. Ron had fared more or less well in his classes; his Charms O.W.L. had been a disaster, having mutated a teacup into a mushroom somehow. Most of his grades were either right on par, or just below Harry's. The exception being that Ron didn't have any O's!

"How'd you fair, Hermione?" Ron asked, looking up from Harry's results.

Hermione was still standing off to the side, and had managed to place some distance between herself and Rayne. The way she was standing, Harry thought she suspected her of trying to read over her shoulder. It would've been funny, had Harry not found the scene highly irritating. Ron didn't wait for her to respond, and quickly snatched the parchment out of her hands. Surprisingly, Hermione didn't fight back, but waited with a sort of anxious look on her face as he read through them.

Ron looked up at her. "How'd you manage to get an Exceeds Expectations in Astronomy!? None of us passed that test, so how did you do it?"

"I was really worried about that one," she moaned, biting her lower lip. "There just wasn't enough time to fill in everything, what with Hagrid trying to escape, and the Ministry Stunning him! And after poor Professor McGonagal got hit by all six of them, I could barely think at all!"

Harry peered over Ron's shoulder to have a glimpse. "That's the only score you've got that isn't a perfect O!" he teased, shaking his head. "Hermione, you've done better than all of us put together!"

Rayne was looking at all of them, meanwhile, with a perplexed expression. "Just what sort of exams are these?" she wondered. "Why did a teacher get attacked during an Astronomy exam? And who tried to escape?!"

Harry found himself laughing. "It's a really long story," he told her. "I'll have to tell it to you sometime."

"It was horrible!" Hermione said, glaring at him. "Professor McGonagal could've really been hurt! And so could have Hagrid!"

"Yeah, but they're all fine now," Ron pointed out. "How'd you think McGonagal's doing these days? She seemed alright when school ended, but still! Six Stunning spells to the chest!"

"She must be fine," Harry noted, pointing at his scores. "She left a message saying I've been made Quidditch captain."

"What?!" Ron gasped, looking farther down. "I didn't even see that. Well, congratulations, I guess. Come on, and lets show these to mum. The sooner she gets a look at them, the less I have to hear her yell."

Mrs. Weasley, however, seemed very chipper with Ron's results. Of course, she also managed to point out that Fred and George had only gotten a total of three O.W.L.s, which possibly helped his case. Harry and Hermione were both congratulated, especially Harry, given him being named Quidditch captain, and were offered extra sausages. Harry shared one with Rayne, who thanked him before quietly snaking her hand around his. Together, they sat there close to one another, barely touching.

It sent ripples down his spine.

After breakfast, Harry wanted to show Rayne around the rest of the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley provided the chance for them to slip away by fussing over the state of Ron's hair. It'd gotten very shaggy over the last several months, and she was determined he wouldn't leave the kitchen before she'd given him a proper haircut. Hermione, on the other hand, was going over her results again and again, muttering to herself about classes and spellbooks. Ginny was nowhere to be found, so the two of them had the garden to themselves as they walked along hand in hand.

"You have some interesting friends," she noted, as they watched Crookshanks chase gnomes back and forth. "Hermione doesn't like me very much, though."

"What?" Harry tried to think of a lie quickly, but Rayne was one step ahead of him.

"Dhampir have very good hearing," she informed, giving him a coy smile. "I overheard the whole conversation last night."

"Oh." Harry was embarrassed, both for what Hermione had suggested, and the fact that he now felt he hadn't done a very good job of defending her.

"Champion of the wizarding world, huh? That's a pretty high honor to have."

Now Harry was really embarrassed. But before he could say anything else, Rayne spoke again.

"So," she said, turning her head away slightly. "Do you believe I'm a Death Eater, Harry?"

"No," he said at once. "And neither does she, really. If the Weasleys thought for a second you were, they'd have never let you in here. Hermione is just being Hermione, really; she gets suspicious about everything!"

"Besides," he added. "You don't have the Mark."

That got her attention. "The Dark Mark," he explained, pushing her sleeve up ever so slightly. "I've seen your arms bare about a hundred times now. There's never been any sign of a Mark there. Plus, you told me once that you couldn't have any kind of tattoo markings. Of course, I really don't know how it gets there, so it could be magical..."

"What are you talking about?" she wondered, pushing up her sleeves. "A Dark Mark?"

"Right," Harry said. "Most people don't know. It's how Death Eaters recognize one another. They have this mark on their arms, to show they work for Voldemort."

"That sounds..." she said, pausing. "Creepy! Now, I kinda feel bad about making you get that Hungarian Horntail!"

Harry had completely forgotten about that! He'd need to be very careful about where he changed clothes while he was at the Burrow. Somehow, he doubted Mrs. Weasley's patience with Rayne would last much longer if she knew.

Rayne was looking at him closely now, and Harry found himself wanting to kiss her. Each time before had been because of sheer impulse. He hadn't thought about it, but reacted on instinct. Now, she was watching his eyes, and he found himself leaning forward. There was no way to stop, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. His mind was racing, though, and refused to shut up. Rayne was less than an inch away now!

**BANG!**

The door to the back of the Burrow slammed shut, and Ron came storming out towards them with a furious glare in his eyes. Harry thought perhaps for a second he was angry at them, attempting to make out on his fence without permission. Then he got a look at Ron's new haircut, and fought not to laugh. His mother had trimmed it down to the point that it nearly touched his scalp in places. The thickest part was on the top, but even that wasn't saying too much. Having had several bad haircuts from his Aunt Petunia, Harry knew better than to laugh out loud, but it was very hard. In truth, it didn't

look too bad. His ears, however, stuck much too far out now, making Ron resemble a house-elf.

"Mum wants to know if Rayne will help her with the laundry," he mumbled, looking down at the ground. "Sorry about this," he added. "But Ginny's not around right now. I think she snuck off to send a letter to one of her boyfriends!"

"That's fine," Rayne said, and headed for the house. "After several days of fighting bloodsuckers, laundry doesn't sound so bad. See in a little while, Harry!"

Ron watched as Rayne headed inside, then turned to face Harry. "Don't say it!" he stated, before Harry could open his mouth. "I know it looks horrible. My ears stick out like a bloody house-elf! Mum wouldn't stop until she nearly shaved me bald, though."

"I wouldn't say that!" Not aloud, anyway, he added, silently. "Hermione can probably fix it. Why don't you go inside and ask her?"

Ron grumbled. "She's being such a prat recently. I'd be afraid of walking off with something worse! D'you know she keeps accusing me of fancying Phlegm! I keep trying to explain it to her, but she won't listen. It just sort of hits me, when she walks into the room. I've gotten a lot better, but every now and then, she'll catch me by surprise."

"At least there's no Yule Ball this time," he offered. "No chance of you asking her out." A thought occurred to him. "Or, have you?"

Ron turned as red as his hair. "No, I haven't!" he growled. "And why aren't you mooning after her like the rest of us. The twins don't even both try to hide it when they're over here with laundry for mum to do! I can't see how Bill stands it, really."

Harry looked over to where Rayne had just left. "Maybe he really is in love with her," he said, thoughtfully. "Maybe being part veela has nothing to do with it?"

Ron nodded. "She showed us a picture of her parents. Phlegm, I mean Fleur, and her father is a dumpy old fart. I mean, her mum's

pretty much what you'd expect and all, but I don't see how she wound up with someone who resembled Cornelius Fudge's distant cousin. They're coming here next summer, by the way. Mum got Bill and her to agree on a July wedding, so we can be there before school starts. I can't wait to leave for Hogwarts; listening to her and mum argue about wedding plans is driving me Bat-Boogey Hex crazy!"

Soon, their conversation turned to more serious things; what the Daily Prophet was saying about Death Eaters, why there had been no mention of Harry's disappearance, and of course, what Voldemort was doing right now.

"Any ideas?" Ron asked, suddenly. "I mean, have you been getting any weird turns like last time, seeing what he'd doing and all?"

"No," Harry said at once. "And it's really strange. I couldn't keep him out last time, but now... it's like he's there, but it's gone all quiet."

"I overheard Dad talking with Dumbledore," Ron said, looking around. "He was asking questions about it, wanting to know whether it would be safe to... you know, bring you here. Not that he thought you'd murder us all in our sleep or something. I think what he was really asking was whether you'd been getting those same dreams as before. The one you had before Christmas saved his life, remember! Dumbledore seems to think You-Know-Who's been doing his best to block you out."

"Dumbledore's been here?" Harry wondered. "When?"

"All the time," Ron shrugged. "He comes by every couple of days. It's usually Order business, which means Mum won't let me stick around to hear. I managed to nick a couple of Extendable Ears from Fred and George's room, though. They helped out some. Dumbledore said something about You-Know-Who trying to possess you down in the Department of Mysteries, but it backfired."

"Yeah," Harry muttered, remembering the pain of having Voldemort in his mind, as well as seeing Sirius once again fly through the black Veil.



"So, you really hurt You-Know-Who then?" Ron pressed. "He couldn't stay in your head for very long?"

"No," Harry said, rubbing his scar. It wasn't bothering him, but thinking about that time gave him a headache.

"Blimey!" Ron went on, oblivious to his discomfort. "That's gotta be something! I mean, you were popping in and out of his mind all last year, but he couldn't stand being in yours for more than a second or two. D'you think that's got something to do with the prophecy?"

"No idea," he admitted, bring his hand away from the scar. "Rayne knows about it, by the way. She overheard us talking last night, including the part where Hermione thought she was a Death Eater!"

Ron had the decency to look embarrassed. "Sorry about that, mate!" he said quickly. "But talking of Rayne, do you mind if I asking you a private sort of question? Mate to mate sort of thing."

"Alright," Harry said, wondering where this would lead. Ron cleared his throat and raised himself to where he towered over Harry. "Is there... you know, anything going on between you two? You and Rayne, I mean!"

Harry considered being honest, but decided at the last second that discretion was by far the better part of valor. "We'd just friends," he quickly answered, hoping his eyes didn't betray anything. "Nothing more. She was someone to talk to when I was stuck with the Dursleys. And," he added. "She did save me from those vampires."

"Good point," Ron said. "I thought maybe it was something like that. Cuz, you know..."

And then Ron's face grew very serious. "If you got shagged before I did, I swear I'd have to kill you!"

Harry was suddenly very glad that it was summer holiday, and Ron could not use magic against him.

The next several days passed without too great incident. That is, if one didn't consider Molly Weasley fluttering about in a huff, mumbling under her breath like a Hippogriff with it's wings clipped. Bill and Fleur had taken to spending as much time with one another as possible, usually attached at either the hip or lip! Arthur Weasley was rarely seen these days, except in the mornings or evenings. His promise to hear Harry's whole story was put on hiatus. Mrs. Weasley finally slowed down long enough to explain that he'd been promoted.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Harry!" she exclaimed, when Harry inquired. "I thought you already knew. But it's such good news, after all; Arthur's been promoted!"

That did take him back. "To what?" he wondered. Surely, Harry thought, not Minister of Magic, since Lupin had said someone named Rufus Scrimgeour had taken Fudge's place.

"Department of Muggle Security," she declared, breaking his train of thought. "He's been fussing with Muggle objects for years, the Ministry decided to leave him in charge of a whole department. Arthur's got twelve whole people under him, now, and they work to protect Muggles from You-Know-Who! It's actually a very big responsibility, which of course is the reason why he hasn't been in much. But I've checked, and he's swore to me that it's been marked down for him to take the night off of your birthday. So, everything is good to go, dear!"

Arthur Weasley did show up early in time for Sirius' memorial. Molly decided to hold it on the night before his birthday, since according to her, turning sixteen should be a happy occasion. It struck him as odd that she'd be willing to arrange something like this. To Harry's recollection, Molly had never gotten along well with his godfather. Things became a bit clearer as he was introduced to a small table dresser left far down the hallway. There were three candles there, one Harry assumed, for Sirius. Molly caught him staring as she came through with a bundle of folded clothes, and smiled sadly.

"The others are for my two older brothers," she explained, straightening them. "They were killed during the first war, while I was

still at Hogwarts. I remember my mother coming to get me, so we could attend their funerals."

She made a small sound, and covered her mouth quickly. "A day doesn't go by that I don't think of them. It's terrible, really, how war seems to take away the best of us all. Oh, they would have loved having you around, Harry. Gryffindors to the core, they were; full of brash and boldness, and always ready to do the right thing."

And then, Harry couldn't help but note, they'd died. Just as Sirius had died trying to protect him.

"No one should forget the people they've lost," she muttered, before moving on. "No one."

Harry spent the rest of the night sitting very close to Rayne. Ginny was very friendly towards the both of them, unlike Hermione, who still refused to really get along with her. Rayne didn't seem to mind, although she confessed in private before others started showing up that Molly had grilled her on her past. She'd left out a few details, admittedly, but mostly Mrs. Weasley had wanted to know how they became friends.

"She almost made it sound like I was up to no good," Rayne finished, looking a little amused. "I think she's afraid for your virtue, or something."

Harry blushed, and looked the other way. "Ron's mum can be a little..."

"Overprotective," Rayne offered, grinning. "I got that, and it's really not that big a deal. Besides," she added, leaning in close. "How do you know I'm not a threat to your virtue?"

In spite of the subdued atmosphere, it took a very long time for Harry to stop blushing. Members of the Order came in one after the other, first having to pass the checkpoint questions Arthur Weasley set up. Hagrid got stumped on one, and spent several minutes trying to assure everyone that he really wasn't a Death Eater, and only needed a moment to collect his thoughts. Ginny finally stood up and

led him to a nearby foot stool that'd been magically reenforced to support his size and weight. Hagrid grinned cheerily as he laid eyes on Harry, but thankfully, Ron's mother came in a moment later with several bottles of firewhiskey and a cup for each of them. Harry didn't feel like answering questions as to where he'd disappeared to just yet.

He watched as each cup was filled, before floating to their prospective owners. Harry noted that everyone in the room who was underage had considerably less than others. Even Rayne, who should have been of age, had the same ammount as he. She simply nodded when he glanced at her glass, and raised it along with everyone else. Harry's was the last to go up, as he hadn't been paying attention.

"To Sirius," Professor Lupin said quietly. "And to everyone else who has given their lives to fight the Dark!"

"Here! Here!" Hagrid called out, before downing his in one gulp.

Harry felt a lump rise up in his throat as he swallowed. Though it was only a spot, the firewhiskey still burned its way down his throat. Rayne drank hers without so much as batting an eye, while Ron had to have Hermione clap him on the back.

"The twins both said they couldn't make it," Mrs. Weasley whispered to him, as the room began to break up into various groups. "They had some kind of emergency at the shop just before closing time, and I said that it'd be better if they didn't try traveling after nightfall. Too dangerous, you see. But they swore to be here for your birthday tomorrow, Harry. You are turning sixteen, after all!"

Harry thanked her, and wandered off to be by himself. He noticed, as he walked past, that Professor Lupin was looking intently over to where Tonks stood. His eyes never moved an inch from her face. Tonk was looking a little more grey than usual, but her hair still retained a bit of pink here and there. It was almost as if she'd grown older overnight, and didn't quite make it.

Wondering what was wrong, Harry wandered down to the end of the hallway where the table dresser was sitting. More candles had been

added to it, to the point that it almost looked on fire. Sirius' candle still hung out farther than the others, only now it had company. The thought made Harry's chest tighten painfully.

There was a drop of firewhiskey left in his goblet, and Harry strained to get every last drop out. As he did, a pair of hands slid around his mid-section, pulling him in close. He didn't bother looking up, as it could only be Rayne. She held him there as he stared into the candlelight, letting each individual flame burn into his memory. Each one meant that someone had lost somebody, that he was not alone in his grief. Rather than take comfort in it, this only served to remind Harry of what lay ahead.

Neither could live while the other survived!

Rayne seemed to be reading his thoughts. Turning him around, she placed a chaste kiss on his lips, then pulled something out of her coat pocket. "I snuck it out of there when nobody was watching," she said, holding up a near-full bottle of firewhiskey. "Shall we?"

Harry thought for a moment, then took the arm she offered. They wound up settling on the roof with a wide span of stars to look at. Rayne had her glass with him, and filled Harry's before giving a toast of her own.

"To victory!" she said, raising hers up high. "And to living life, for as long as we may have it!"

## Chapter 11

### Birthday Surprises

by Ri-kun

Harry awoke the next morning with a pounding headache. The bedsheets thrown wildly over his body weight as much as Hagrid to him, and his body was sweating profusely. His mouth tasted as if he'd spent all last night licking the inside of Snape's used cauldrons. He couldn't lift his body at first, and when it finally obeyed the simple commands, the effort nearly left him totally spent. For a moment, he wondered what was wrong with him, then the night came pouring back.

He'd spent the rest of Sirius' memorial service on the roof of the Burrow with Rayne, drinking firewhiskey she'd smuggled out. Some vague part of him, whispering in a voice bearing resemblance to both Molly Weasley and Hermoine, told Harry that he should feel ashamed of himself. Too much of his brain was addled at the moment to really listen, though.

He was able to stumble out of bed after several false starts. The floor was surprisingly cool, and felt wonderful against his overheated body. Coughing, he stood up and felt himself sway, along with an overwhelming urge to vomit. He did, in fact, not throw up, but this was most likely due to the fact that his stomach was empty. It nevertheless made several attempts to, and it was only through sheer force of willpower that he kept whatever remained inside of him from escaping.

At last, Harry felt well enough to stand. He managed to make it down the hall with little trouble, save for several accidental collisions with the wall. The bathroom lay open and empty just ahead. Grateful, Harry threw himself in and slammed the door behind him, making his head scream with the noise. Splashing cold water on his face, he took a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and immediately swore that he would never again drink.

At least, nowhere near as much!

When he at last emerged, Rayne was waiting for him beside the door, and wordlessly pressed a vial of something into the palm of his hands.

"Sorry," she mumbled, remorsefully. "I guess we both overdid it!"

Harry felt she didn't look half as bad as he did, but wasn't about to say so. Looking at the vial in confusion, he held it up in front of her. "What is this?" he wondered, trying to read what was written on the side.

"Recovery potion," she said, stepping towards the bathroom. "Made just for situations like this. I'll be out in a second! My stomach wants to have a word with me in private about my drinking habits!"

Harry gratefully unscrewed the top off, and downed the magenta colored liquid in one gulp. Immediately, something warm and spicy poured through him, causing his eyes to bulge out. Harry felt as if he'd been attacked from behind by a Blast-Ended Skrewt, and then dumped into a vat of hot coffee! His whole body was jolted by something he had no words to describe with. As soon as it came, however, the sensation was gone. Harry gasped for air, dropping the vial on the floor in the process.

After raising up, he found he no longer felt anywhere near as bad. Rayne came out a moment later, and he had the chance to get another glimpse of himself in the mirror. His face was no longer as pale or sallow, and his eyes had ceased to be bloodshot and red. Thinking that this was something Fred and George would love, Harry followed Rayne downstairs to the breakfast table. Molly was already up and moving, making breakfast for everyone. Ginny wasn't down yet, but everyone else turned as they entered the room.

"Harry!" Molly said, ignoring Rayne. "I was just about to call you! Come, sit down."

Harry took a seat with Rayne near Ron and Hermione, both of whom watched them like leery hawks. Harry didn't have time to muse on what was bothering them, because Ginny came in a second later with a rather smug look on her face. She gave Harry a cheeky grin before

sitting down across the table from where he was. Mrs. Weasley was apparently going all-out, for she'd bewitched practically everything in the kitchen to work overtime. Harry wondered what the occasion was, but found out a moment later.

"Well, today is the big day, isn't it?" she said, grinning his way.

"Bit gay?" Harry murmured. His mouth, apparently, was still not recovered completely. "Big day?" he repeated.

"Your birthday!" she exclaimed. "And I've made an extra-special breakfast for you, Harry. Make sure you tuck in, now; Arthur had to leave early this morning, but he and everyone else will be here in time for tonight. We'll be having it outside in the garden, if that's alright with you."

Harry just nodded, having completely forgotten that it was indeed his sixteenth birthday. One more and he would be legal age; able to perform magic without the Ministry looking over his shoulder. The thought was enough to make him smile a little, in spite of how he felt. Harry took hold of his fork and ate silently, sparing a moment to give Rayne a small grin. Ginny kept watching him the whole time, as if she knew something he didn't. When he and Rayne stood up, she followed them into the drawing room.

Hermione wanted to go over her O.W.L. results again, to pick out what classes they should take. Harry and Ron both groaned, and begged to be let off. She spent the next several minutes scowling at them, before Ginny brought up Quidditch.

Harry remembered Rayne saying that she'd never had time to learn how to play. Without her, there wouldn't be enough with a two-on-one match, but she was surprisingly agreeable. With the promise that they would go easy on her, the four split up into teams. Ron would play Keeper with Ginny, and Harry would be Chaser with Rayne. Hermione brought her books out along with a chair to a shade near the trees. It was actually fun, and Rayne proved to be a capable player, though she let several goals go by at first. After several practice rounds, in which she improved quite well, they decided to play for real.



Ginny was every bit as capable a Chaser as she'd been Seeker the previous year. Harry had a hard time keeping up with her at first, since he was used to flying higher up above the game to look for the Snitch. They'd borrowed some balls that Rayne was able to bewitch, and she even knew a barrier spell or two to keep them from wandering too far into the Muggle village. After several games, the last one ending when Ron came too far out and collided head-on with Harry into a spectacular crash, the four called it quits. Harry was okay, but felt a sting of injured pride when Rayne checked him over. Ron begged Hermione off as she insisted on looking him over for broken bones, yet Harry noticed a bright red creeping up his best friend's neck. Several times, he found his eyes wandering their way as they walked back to the Burrow together. Neither one was touching the other, but their hands brushed a time or two all the same. It made Harry wonder.

Ginny, meanwhile, was quiet as they headed back to the house. Rayne begged permission to clean herself up before anyone arrived, so Hermione conceded to show her where she could find everything. Ron went inside to find an ointment his mother kept for bruises, leaving Harry outside with Ginny, alone.

"Glad to see you're feeling better," she noted, giving him a warm smile.

Harry gulped. "Oh, right. I woke up this morning, and... was a bit under the weather."

The excuse sounded pathetic to him, but Ginny merely chuckled. "I meant, about Sirius being gone."

"Oh." That shook him for a moment. Harry thought at first he'd been punched in the gut, but the feeling only lasted for a moment. "I..." he spoke quietly, wondering whether Ginny would understand. "I keep... thinking about the day it happened. About Voldemort sending me that fake message, just so I would go down to where the prophecy was kept."

"I was expecting you to be in worse shape," Ginny replied. "We all were, really. I guess having her around really lifted your spirits, huh?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "It did. She was..." Harry paused for a moment. "She was just someone I could talk to."

For some reason, Harry felt like he was apologizing. He'd know for years now that Ginny had nursed a not-so-private crush on him, partially due to his saving her down in the Chamber of Secrets. In his fourth year, she'd become much more open around him, and being in the DA had allowed them to become friends. Standing with her there, he suddenly wondered just how she thought of him now.

"I am..." he finished, lamely. "I'm feeling better, though."

"You should," she said, holding up a vial. "Recovery potion works great after drinking to excess."

"What?!"

Ginny snickered at him. "I used to find bottles of this stuff all over the place, especially near Fred and George's room! You leaving it there was almost like having them back in the house again. So, where did you two sneak off to? Mum went looking after awhile, but she left out a couple of hiding places."

Ginny added, with a knowing look, "She always expects the best from you, so I don't think she was really trying!"

"Ginny..."

"Oh, come off it, Harry!" she exclaimed. "I'm not about to turn you in. I didn't even have the heart to let Mum know the one time Percy stumbled home early in the morning, drunk as a lake frog! Of course, he was in worse shape than you..."

Harry was beginning to wonder if he really knew Ginny at all. The mention of Percy, however, made him think of something. "Have you heard from Percy?" he asked. "Rayne sleeps in his bedroom, so I figured he hadn't come home yet. But, has he finally admitted..."

"No," Ginny said, and now she looked angry. "Dad runs into him from time to time at the Ministry, but they don't speak. Percy just ignores him until he gives up and goes away. He still has his position as the Minister's Junior Secretary, so he must be happy."

Harry found it hard to believe that even Percy would continue to live in denial about what was happening. He'd always come across as a bit of a pompous git; being the least favorite Weasley in his book, Harry had had little to do with him through the years. Still...

"He's a git!" Ginny swore, shaking him out of his thoughts. "Mum still tries to send him letters, but they all come back unopened. Dumbledore suggested she give him some time to mull it over, but I'm thinking we should hex him with a nice pair of goat horns, if he ever does come back!"

Harry was glad to have Ginny on his side, and that she bore no grudge against him for not returning her affections! The rest of the afternoon was spent in relative silence, with birthday guests coming in one after the other in breaks. Bill and Fleur arrived home at the same time, and immediately took up space on the couch to snuggle together. Bill had his head in her lap, which made Harry twitch a little. He almost stretched out across Rayne's, but that would have send Ron falling to the floor. Plus, Mrs. Weasley came in a moment later to inform everyone that they were moving out to the gardens.

Bill and Charley had once again moved the set of narrow tables out to the backyard, this time without the incident of engaging in a mid-air brawl. Perhaps it had been the lack of Percy to yell from his bedroom window at them that'd prompted such quiet consideration. In any case, Harry took a seat with Rayne next to him, and Hermione with Ron on the other side. Bill sat across them all with Fleur, and handed a bag full of Galleons to them before everyone else came along.

"Hey!" Ron barked angrily, when he saw what was inside. "Where's mine?!"

"That is Harry's," Bill explained calmly. "I got it out for him to save everybody time tomorrow."

"What happens tomorrow?" Harry wondered, counting what was in his bag.

"It iz zee day you vill travel to Diagon Alley to get jor school books," Fleur said, not looking at any of them. "I sveah, there iz such security nowadays, even at Gringotts! Ze little goblins are not letting anyvon in without first passing ze required security checkpoints. I had Bill take yourz out, Harry, through a friend of his so joo will not hav to go through all of zis nonesense!"

Rayne seemed surprised to see how much Harry had in his bank account, so he quickly stashed it away. Ron was sulking over next to Hermione, who appeared to not notice, which annoyed him all the more. Somehow, he'd forgotten to tell her that he'd inherited a fortune once from his parents, and again from Sirius. That meant his vault was probably overflowing with wizard gold by now. He wondered if he wouldn't have to get another one. Bill could probably tell him, but Harry forgot immediately afterwards.

It was by no means his fault. Everyone became distracted as a flying weasel shot down out of the sky and landed in the middle of the table, next to the fried bean casserole Molly had just set down. The weasel rose up on his hind legs at once, and began speaking in Arthur Weasley's voice.

"Molly! The Minister of Magic is on his way to speak with Harry. I barely had time to slip away to send this message. Dumbledore has asked me to see if you can't get him out of sight. Just make up some excuse about him being there so that when I arrive, we can make up some excuse. Say that Harry has been bedridden! Say that he's upstairs with dragon pox if you have to, but keep him out of sight by the time I arrive. This is serious, I am sorry to say."

The weasel vanished from sight the moment it was finished speaking. Everyone looked at each other in surprise, as if not sure what had happened. Then, Molly and Lupin both grabbed Harry by the shoulders. Rayne leaped up, as if to stop him, but then paused.

"Come on, Harry!" Molly said, urgently. "We need to get you inside. Just hurry on up to your room and stay there. We'll handle this!"

Rayne followed him at once, along with Ron and Hermione. Mrs. Weasley looked like she wanted to shoo them off, but Harry quickly took Rayne by the hand and led her with him. They barely made it to his bedroom and shut the door when a loud crack could be heard just down the road. Harry had left the window open, and it echoed through like one of the twin's exploding Catherine Wheels.

"Oh, that'd be them!" Molly exclaimed. "Harry, you be a dear and stay inside, at least until the Minister is gone."

Lupin and her were gone with that. Ron gave him an apologetic look once and then was gone, leaving Harry alone with Rayne, wondering what on earth had happened. Thinking quickly, he tore open his trunk and began rummaging through it. Rayne started to ask what he was looking for, but then Harry proudly held up his Invisibility Cloak.

"Get under it," he told her, slipping it around him.

Rayne was willowy enough to fit without even her ankles being exposed. Trying not to think about how close they were, Harry eased over to the window and peered out. Sure enough, Arthur Weasley appeared a moment later with someone Harry assumed must be the new Minister of Magic. Harry thought he finally got why this man had been elected. Though he was much older in years, there was a definite strength about him. His hair hung around him wildly like some kind of animal mane.

The Minister immediately took a seat without being asked. Arthur and the others gradually took their places, but there was a definite air of tension around them. Harry couldn't hear what was being said, yet it was clear the Minister was in no hurry.

"Can you hear him?" Harry asked suddenly, remembering what Rayne had told him about dhampir.

"Not a problem," she replied, softly. "I'll relay to you..."

"Such a shame young Harry has taken ill so soon before Hogwarts. Does this mean he won't be attending school on the first of September?"

"We think he should be fine by then!"

This was from Molly, who looked very uncomfortable for some reason. "It was wonderful for you to stop by just to check on his well-being."

This struck Harry as very wrong. In all his previous dealings with the Ministry, his well-being had been the least they were concerned with! Something about this made him think the new Minister was up to no good. What came next practically confirmed it!

"Are you certain there's no way for me to see him. I have some business that I'd like to speak of with him; it is rather urgent!"

"We're... sorry, Minister. But Dumbledore asked that he be kept in bed until further notice. Harry's been through so much in the last year, especially since You-Know-Who has come back."

"Yes, and wandering around in the Forbidden Forest. Rather rash, don't you think?"

Harry nearly punched the wall in his anger! He hadn't been 'wandering around' in the Forbidden Forest at all; the Ministry's High Inquisitor had led him at wand-point under threat of being hit with the Cruciatus Curse there!

"That lying sack of..." Harry began, but Rayne held a hand up.

"He's asking if they mind him staying for a bit," she told him. "I think he's hoping you'll turn up if he waits it out."

"I was NEVER wandering in the Forbidden Forest!" he insisted. "I've never gone 'wandering' in my whole life, unless I needed to!" The lie in that statement struck him like a ton of bricks, forcing him to clear his throat. "Hermione and I..."

"I know, Harry," she said gently. "Despite what others might say about you, I know you'd never do anything needlessly reckless."

That made him pause. "You do?"

Rayne just smiled warmly, and sudden Harry felt loads better. His anger with the Minister's comments about him were still lying somewhere near the surface, but the warmth spreading through his veins caused it to abate.

"Want to play some Exploding Snap?" she offered, seizing a box left behind by the twins. "I'll deal? It doesn't look like the Minister is going to be leaving anytime soon. So much for your happy birthday, huh?"

"It still doesn't compare to having a half-giant smash down the front door with the news that I was a wizard. I always figured anything after that one would pale by comparison, anyway!"

Rayne nearly dropped the cards. "What?"

"I'll explain later."

Harry laughed, and helped her pick them up, glad that none of them had blown a hole in the floor. He'd noticed the Minister paying extra-close attention to the Burrow during his exchange with the Weasleys.

Harry and Rayne spent the rest of his birthday in the room, while the Minister talked loudly down below. Most of it was noisy enough that even Harry picked up on. Apparently, the Minister was hoping he'd come out and see what was going on. Harry stayed put where he was, despite his stomach beginning to rumble. His mind kept drifted over to the delicious food Mrs. Weasley had made just for him, and couldn't help but hate the new Minister for making him miss out on it. It seemed that the Ministry was still falling back on it's bad habits!

Harry finally snuck under the Invisibility Cloak when he couldn't stand it anymore, and snuck downstairs to the kitchen. There wasn't much to sneak from the refrigerator, and he felt rather bad for it. It was, in his defense, very late, though, and they'd been waiting without food for hours. Nicking a few things, he left a Galleon in thanks on the

counter, wondering if Molly Weasley wouldn't force him to take it back come morning.

The food was simple, but Harry found he was getting used to eating this way. It helped that he hadn't been fed much over the years, having to watch as his overstuffed cousin crammed as much as his mouth would hold before letting Harry near any. They ate together in relative silence, pausing to eavesdrop on the Minister when he talked loudly for everyone to hear. At several points, it got fairly ridiculous, to the point that several birds in the trees flew off. Harry found himself laughing at the absurdity of it all, and Rayne joined in.

After a time, they both grew sleeping, and spread out on the bed. Harry almost stopped to ask whether Rayne shouldn't head back to her own room, but changed his mind. Rayne had just snaked an arm around his waist, and was pulling herself closer. Harry killed the lamp, and stretched out next to her.

He couldn't remember falling asleep.

A hand was running along up and down his chest in slow motion, making his breath speed up. Harry looked down in confusion through eyes that still held the sleep from the night before. It was unbearably hot now, and the sunlight from the morning filled the room. Not a sound could be heard. Harry told Rayne's hand in his, holding it close to him. His heart beat frantically over hit, and she pressed her fingers into the skin surrounding it, as if to cup it in her palm.

He turned his head to her, then, wondering if this wasn't all just some strange dream.

Then, she looked in his eyes, and he knew this was real.

The invitation had never been more obvious. Slowly, they both met each other halfway, and as their lips connected, Harry felt his arms snake around Rayne's waist of their own accord. In almost no time at all, their kiss had deepened, and Harry felt her hands going up underneath his shirt to brush over his chest. For a moment, only a moment, he hesitated. Then, boldly, Harry reached underneath Rayne's jacket to her top, and ran his fingers over her breasts. To his



surprise, Rayne let out a moan and ran her fingernails down his backside.

Had he done something wrong? But then, she kissed him even harder this time. Together, they fell back on the bed, their hands reached over to one another. Harry continued to playfully pick and tease with her mounds, especially her nipples, and was rewarded when Rayne groaned deeply into his throat.

Harry then felt her tugging at his shirt, and released her just long enough to free his arms. Then, Rayne was reaching into the folds of his boxer shorts, while at the same time nipping ever so lightly at the more sensitive areas of his neck. And along the collarbone!... This, Harry found, was torture at it's best. Taking the initiative, he pulled back her jacket and began his own torture, licking and nibbling down her shoulder, worrying with the strap of her top along the way. Rayne, meanwhile, had found a handful inside Harry's shorts, and was giving this new discovery her full and undivided attention.

"Why Harry!" Rayne whispered playfully into his ear as she stroked the length of him. "You have grown, haven't you?"

Harry could barely breath, with what she was doing to him. Somehow, though, he managed to raise up and replied, "Is that a bad thing?"

Rayne actually giggled into his ear, and continued to pump him. "Oh... I'd have to say no on that one!"

Somehow, as they kissed each other passionately, Harry managed to loose his shorts. It soon dawned on him that he was lying in bed naked with a beautiful woman... who just so happened to be still completely clothed. Slowly, tentatively, Harry reached out with a hand and slid the strap on Rayne's top down. When she made no move to stop him, he grew bolder, and pushed it the rest of the way. Reaching for the fly on her pants, Harry found himself stopped by her as she stared into his face.

"Did... did I do something wrong?" he asked quickly.

Rayne just smiled and shook her head. "You couldn't," she told him. "Let me."

Slowly, with all the gracefulness of a cat, Rayne climbed out of his bed, and stood before him. Then, swaying her body in a rhythm Harry was sure only she could hear, Rayne began to peel one layer after another off her clothing free. First came the jacket, then the boots, and finally the top and leather pants. Harry was surprised to find that Rayne wore no underwear whatsoever underneath. There, in the dim light coming from his window, she stood before him. In all her naked glory. Rayne seemed to be waiting nervously for him as she ran her hands lightly over certain areas of her body. Finally, Harry just let loose a deep breath and sighed.

"Wow!"

Rayne took this as a compliment, and smiled at him. With the same cat-like movements, she crawled her way back into bed, and began looking Harry over herself. This made Harry very uncomfortable, and he quickly tried to hide himself. Rayne, however, would have none of it, and began running her fingers up and down his arms and legs. Then over his chest and up to where the pulsing veins were. Slowly, as though entranced, she rubbed her fingers in a circle around where the pulse beat. Amazingly, Harry felt no fear from her at all. Rayne then leaned in forward, and began kissing her way down his body. She paused a moment to lick and kiss at his navel, making him squirm. Then, she went even lower...

Harry's eyes bulged out of their sockets as the sensations rocked his whole body. Rayne didn't hesitate one bit as his hips bucked upward of their own accord, but simply took them in her hands and held on to them as she continued to work him with her mouth. Her tongue seemed to be doing things that, until now, he would have never thought possible! Harry couldn't breathe, couldn't think. All he saw were stars. Dimly, he was aware of some kind of ringing in his ears, and that his toes (and feet!) had curled up. And then... Then, there was some kind of explosion. And white lights all around him. And... he could have sworn he was floating above the room, looking down on the both of them. But then, the weight of the bed shifted, and he came crashing down. Somehow, though, his body felt weightless.

"Welcome back to earth," Rayne whispered smugly at him. "Did you enjoy your flight?"

Harry looked over at where she lay next to him, her eyes shining in the dark. Raising up in one fluid movement, Harry threw his body on top of hers without so much as a warning. Rayne seemed shocked at this as she looked into his eyes. Then, Harry kissed her deeply once, and her body relaxed. Slowly, he worked his way down her cheek, throat, pausing only for a little while at her nipples to kiss and play with them. Rayne was enjoying this, by the sounds emitting from her throat. Reluctantly, he kept on going, though.

Harry passed down to her navel, and spent a minute or so licking the sweat from it. Then, at last, he reached his destination. Licking once, he was surprised by the taste of her. Salty, and somewhat tangy, but sweet at the same time as well... Licking once more, and then again... and again. Rayne's fingers clawed at the top of his head, through his hair as he drank from her. Moans, and a few words he was sure he had never been allowed to say, were coming from her throat now. Still, he kept on going as she continued to claw through his hair. Finally, Rayne let loose a scream, as her entire body froze up. For a moment, Harry thought she might be having some kind of a fit. Then, as her thrashing subsided, he felt her grip on his hair ease slightly.

Gently, Harry raised up and stared at her in the face. Sweat was rolling down from her in droves now, and her breathing was coming in small gasps, as though she had just run a marathon with a Hippogriff. And yet, he could see she was smiling.

"So," Harry asked tentatively. "How was that?"

Rayne just laughed and threw her head back on the pillow. "Just... if you don't mind," she said in between breaths. "Where did you learn to do that?!"

Harry blushed a deep shade of red. "Last year... before the dementors attacked Dudley and me. There was this one day when Uncle Vernon was at work, and Dudley was off with his gang. Aunt Petunia had to rush off for a while, something about one of the

neighbor's goings-on. I had the house to myself for a few hours, and..."

Harry paused. "Anyway, I happened to find these..."

"Yes?"

Harry cleared his throat. "There were these... magazines... underneath Dudley's bed. And... well, in one of them, there was this article about... the things that girls do. And, it mentioned that girls really... really like it when guys did this to them. I... uh, never really had the chance to try it out until now, but at the time, it seemed like something I should remember. Just in case."

Rayne laughed at him, then, but it was a tender laugh. "Well, that's a big relief," she said, ruffling his dampened hair. "For a minute there, I was afraid I might have been chasing after a regular playboy!"

Harry felt his cheeks turn slightly red again. "Not in this lifetime, I'm afraid," he mumbled. "I've... uh, I never really... you know..."

Rayne shushed him with a finger to his lips. "I know," she said gently. "And just for the record, you've got nothing to be ashamed of. I'm actually very happy to know I was here first!"

Harry smiled warmly at her. "It's not as though there's a long line."

This won him a raised eyebrow from her. "You can't be serious. No one wants the Boy Who Lived? Unbelievable!"

"Plenty of girls want the Boy Who Lived," Harry whispered softly. "Just no one wants me!"

Rayne was still for a moment. As though in a dream, she ran a finger down the length of his face. "I do," she whispered.

It was Harry who reached for her, and Rayne who held up her arms to welcome him. For along while, they simply cuddled there. Then, the heat between them began to build again. Harry lost track of how long they kissed. How long they touched. How long they...

Eventually, somehow, she wound up on top of him. Bracing her own weight with her arms, Rayne held her body just above the length of him, and met his eyes. Harry had never in his life been inside a Chemist. It had never occurred to him that he might actually need something... Rayne seemed to be reading his thoughts as they played across his face.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm fixed. A trade-off of my vampiric powers. And, just so you know, I'm clean, too."

Harry reached up with his arms and ran his hands along her body. Rayne arched her back as he touched her breasts, her legs, and other places.

"Take me!" he whispered fiercely.

"You're sure?"

The look in her eyes was all she needed to know, but Harry said it again all the same.

"Take me!"

Slowly, ever so carefully, Rayne brushed the tip of him against her opening. She was taking her time, enjoying the effect it was having on him. The whole head was inside of her now, and she raised herself up to lower her body onto him. He was all hers now. Rayne smiled as he watched the waves of pleasure take over him. And they hadn't even really started yet. In this state, he reminded her of a wild animal. One just for her. And he was all hers... Hers to ride home.

"Harry, mate! It's time to wake up! Get your lazy bones out of bed, because your rescuers... have... BLOODY HELL!"

Harry raised up off the bed and Rayne whirled around in shock and horror as the door swung open to reveal both Weasley twins standing in the doorway.

"Oh... sodding... fuck!" Fred stammered. "Major bad timing, bro!"

"You think?!" George quipped, looking on at them, unabashed.

Both Harry and Rayne stayed frozen in their positions, waiting for... something! ANYTHING to happen!

"Uhh..." Fred stammered again. "We'll just... wait outside! Just... do... whatever!"

"Is Harry ready yet?" Ginny said, poking her head through the doorway.

"GINNY! DON'T!"

"Oh, sweet Merlin!" Ginny exclaimed. "Ron, don't come in here!"

"Why?" Ron asked, marching straight passed her. "It's not like Harry doesn't have anything I haven't... seen..."

Ron's voice rose about twenty octaves. "Eeep!" he practically squeaked.

"Ron, you sodding idiot!" Fred growled. "Don't you understand at all what 'Don't come in here!' means?!"

"Just... go and keep watch outside!" George barked. "Make sure Hermione and the others don't get up here!"

"We're already up here," Hermione said, coming in. "What's going on?"

Then Hermione's eyes landed on Harry's bed. And for the first time in Harry's life that he had know her, Hermione had absolutely nothing to say to him.

"Hello all!" Arthur Weasley said, looking in. "What's all the fuss?"

"Dad! Mum! Get out so Harry can see some piece!"

"Precisely!" Fred cheered. "A really big piece!"

## Chapter 12

### Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes

by Ri-kun

Harry dressed in silence, racking his brain for something to say. Everything that came to mind either sounded extremely stupid, or just pathetic. He could never have imagined in his entire life something like this happening. Things had been going so...

His brain stalled as the memory of what he and Rayne had been 'up to', as Fred put it before closing the door behind him, came rushing back. It had been intense, and now faded as if on the tendrils of a long-forgotten dream. His heart ached just a little bit now. What were they supposed to do?

Staying upstairs in the twins' bedroom for the rest of his life didn't seem like a bad idea. It would keep him from having to face everyone downstairs. Assuming, of course, they weren't waiting right outside the door. Harry almost went to check, but then remembered that he hadn't finished putting his clothes on. He also wasn't nearly ready to face everyone. Not after what had just happened!

Rayne finished dressing before he did, and that made Harry get a move on. He wouldn't stay behind and leave her to deal with this alone. She would surely think him a coward, and Harry would sooner face any poor jokes the twins could make than endure that. Pulling his shirt on, he made sure he was fully dressed, then strode slowly over to the door. She was waiting for him there, and threw her arms around him once as he approached. Harry tried to think of something to say, but nothing came.

They just held each other for a moment, not moving. The rest of the world seemed far, far away. It was just the two of them there holding one another. It felt like the strange fragment of someone else's life, one that didn't involve the threat of Voldemort or prophecies. One that hadn't lost his last remaining family to a black, mysterious veil in the blink of an eye. Harry clung to her as if he were drowning, and felt Rayne place a gentle kiss on his head.

Without a word, she reached for the doorknob. Harry walked down the stairs beside her, counting them one after the other, and losing track after three or so. The bottom floor had never looked so far away to him, yet that did nothing to ease the knots in his stomach. Harry gulped as they entered the drawing room where everyone was waiting silently, and met their stares head-on with a blank face.

Everyone looked right back at them. Harry did his best to hold his head up high in defiance, almost as though daring anyone to make a comment. This, of course, was a huge mistake on his part, for the twins could never resist a challenge. And he'd never presented a more clear one than now!

"Hey, look George!" Fred crowed. "Harry's got himself a girlfriend!"

"Yeah, I don't believe it. Harry isn't gay!" George turned to his brother, looking thoughtful. "You owe me five galleons, Fred."

The tension seemed to split as if struck by a hammer. Everyone was glancing over at Fred and George with half-smiles on their faces, as though trying desperately not to laugh. Fleur, Harry saw, was shaking slightly and looking up at him as though she'd never seen him before. Bill, it seemed, was having the least luck hiding his knowing grin.

"I'll throw in another ten if you can guess how long his Firebolt is," Rayne answered, coolly.

Everyone froze, and stared at her. "No takers?" she said, feigning shock. "Not even from you two? I thought you boys played Quidditch with Harry!"

"Not that sort of game!" George muttered quickly. "We don't Beat for any other teams."

"Thank goodness," Harry overheard Ron mutter.

Harry wanted to run and hide, but Rayne had a firm grip on his hand. When he shifted uncomfortably, she gave it a reassuring squeeze, but loosened her grip enough to where he could feel his fingers.



Hermione and Ron were still glowering at him over breakfast. Ginny, however, was doing a good job acting as though nothing odd had happened. Harry began to suspect a lot had been going on in the Weasley house he knew nothing about, if she could take something like this so well. It occurred to him how strange it was that he'd obsess so about her. But then, they'd spent a lot of time together in the D.A.

At least, that was the excuse he used as they stood up. Ginny didn't meet his eyes as they all filled into the drawing room by the fireplace. Thankfully, Arthur Weasley and Professor Lupin were already gone; Molly informed him that they left right after coming up to fetch him.

"I'm so terribly sorry about your birthday," she added, looking grave. "It's such a shame, but we'll do something again tonight once you've all made it home."

She looked positively panicked, and Harry thought he ought to say something. Unfortunately, Fred beat him to it!

"That's alright, Mum," he said, coyly. "Harry's already had his cake, and ate it, too."

"Yeah," George added. "Even with the Minister crashing his party, this was one birthday he's sure to never forget."

His face was a bright shade of vermillion by the time Mrs. Weasley let him go. He thought he saw a suspicious glint in her eye for a moment as she held on a second too long. The thought that Lupin or Mr. Weasley might have told her something made him terribly uneasy, but then, Harry doubted she would have gone this long without saying something.

They were all set to travel by Floo Powder. Molly explained that a secure network had been set up by Arthur just for him. They would arrive at Diagon Alley with a Ministry escort, get their shopping done, and get right back.

"And no side trips!" Mrs. Weasley warned. "They can't keep this line open forever. It's normally only supposed to be used for high Ministry officials. Harry's being allowed because... well, you all know why!"

"We've got it, Mum!" Fred finally said, exasperated. "You've told us a thousand times. We've still got to show Harry the shop; he needs to see what he invested his money in. We came all the way down here so we could get an early start. Penelope is probably swamped by now!"

With great reluctance, Mrs. Weasley finally stepped out of the way and let them pass. Rayne stood by Harry the whole time, and gave a nod to Mrs. Weasley as Ron disappeared in a great gust of green flames.

"We'll keep an eye out for each other, Mrs. Weasley," she said in a low voice. "Promise."

Harry took a handful of the Floo Powder and stepped into the fireplace first. Clearing his throat, he first made sure to tilt his neck up to avoid getting a mouthful of ashes. Floo Powder was by far his least favorite means of travel.

"Diagon Alley!" he shouted, and dropped the powder at his feet.

The world began to spin round him rapidly in a whirlwind of chimney pipes and fire grates. Harry made sure to keep his arms and legs tucked in as close to his body as he could. Even still, his knee scraped up against something once, just before he spilled out into a familiar street. Dusting the ashes off himself, he found Ginny standing not too far away, looking grim.

"She's been like that for weeks now," she told him, confidentially. "Mum, I mean. She wasn't going to let us come here at first, unless the Ministry agreed to give her access."

"Why didn't they?" he wondered, finding this strange.

"The Ministry claims that only seven people can travel through that particular secure network. It's supposed to shut down automatically for an hour after that, to keep intruders or spies out. They normally only use it as an escape route, but Dad's suspicious about the whole thing. I overheard him talking..."

Rayne finally came whooshing out of the grate, looking a bit haggard. "I've always hated traveling this way," she moaned, dusting herself off. "It never fails! I always bang my knee or elbow on something in there."

"I was asked to tell you this right away," she added, looking at him. "Mrs. Weasley said that Professor Lupin and her husband want to talk with you later tonight."

Harry had a vague idea why, and from the look on Rayne's face, so did she. Hoping to change the subject, he looked over at Ginny.

"What were you saying again?" he said quickly. "About the Ministry?"

"Dad thinks the Ministry is trying to get you alone for some reason," she went on, following them out into the main part of the street where the others were. "I've been listening to him talk with Mum about it since school let out. Dumbledore's been pelted with letters from the new Minister every night and day. That's probably why he was at the Burrow last night, too."

Everyone was waiting impatiently as they came up. "Later," Harry said, quietly. "We'll talk later."

"Right," she said, nodding to Rayne as well. "And I wouldn't worry about Dad. Lupin might try and give you both hell, but Dad can't talk about anything like that without burning bright red. He's worse than Ron."

It was a good thing nobody else heard that, because Harry was sure the twins would've never let it go. Ron, Hermione, and the twins were all hanging around two contrasting figures, trying to appear inconspicuous. This was impossible, simply because he'd never seen two individuals look so totally out of place. The first was a squat woman far too old to defend anybody. Harry had been expecting a team of Aurors, or else the men who'd driven him following the Quidditch World Cup. The second more than made up for it, though. Hagrid grinned at Harry waved his way.

"'Ello Harry!" he practically shouted. "You're lookin' more stout than ever. And who's this fine-looking young lass?"

"Her name is Rayne," Ginny said at once. "She showed up with Harry the other night."

"Glad to see you finally showed your face to us, Harry!" Hagrid added, not unkindly. "Had us all worried, ya did."

"That was my fault," Rayne said at once. "Harry was helping me with a... problem I had."

"Yeah," Ron mumbled. "And then she returned the favor!"

"Ron!" Hermione hissed, looking positively mortified.

"Problem?" Hagrid asked, looking grave. "What sort of problem?"

"Pests. There were some nasty little bloodsuckers running around."

"I think I might've taught Harry a thing or two about dealing with different beasts over the last coupa years." Hagrid was practically swelling up with his own pride, so Harry didn't bother to mention he'd learned more about how to run from his Care of Magical Creatures teacher than anything else.

"Wotcher, Harry," said the old lady as they began walking off together. "Stay close with me the whole time we're here. Dumbledore doesn't think Death Eaters will attack Diagon Alley, but it isn't out of the question. If anything does go wrong, however, I'm to get you out of here. Hagrid will provide us with cover."

Harry instantly frowned. "Don't argue!" she said at once, sharply. "This is serious business."

"Harry," Rayne added, gently. "Hagrid is half-giant. If anything does happen, he can take a lot more damage than anyone else. Probably a lot more than I can!"

"How did you know..."

"Come on, Harry. He's way too big to be anything else! Besides, 'I have a friend who's part-giant', remember?"

"Oh, right."

"Who are you again?" Tonk said, eyeing her suspiciously.

"She's Rayne," Harry butted in. "And she's with me. If you don't like it, I can leave right now and save you the trouble."

Tonk wouldn't look in Harry's direction, except to glance at him. "Is she the one who showed up with you at the Weasley's doorstep? Dumbledore nearly had a fit when you disappeared. The entire Order went out looking for you, and so did the Ministry. Luckily, we found you first."

"No one really found me," Harry countered, angrily. "Professor Lupin could only enter Grimmauld Place because Dumbledore told him where it was. Speaking of which, I've been meaning to ask someone, how was Rayne able to get through the Fidelius Charm?"

"No idea," she replied, shrugging. "Dumbledore is Secret-Keeper, though, so he would know. He'd going to want to have a word with you once school starts, I suspect."

Harry wasn't too thrilled with that. "Looks like I've managed to get you in trouble again, huh?" Rayne asked, as they entered Madame Malkin's together.

"It's worth it," he said, squeezing her hand.

They'd been holding onto one another the whole time without thinking about it. It felt natural to him now. Even the threat of Voldemort, or a Death Eater attack, couldn't make him feel bad about today. Harry felt like it'd been ages since they were out with each other. He hadn't realized how much the freedom of being on his own with her had meant to him. With it gone, he wanted the day to last as long as it could.

Unfortunately, neither Hagrid nor Tonk let either of them alone for a second. The twins, as fully qualified wizards now, could come and go as they pleased. They'd departed almost at once for their joke shop to alleviate Penelope, whom Harry learned as George leaned into to whisper, was Percy's ex-girlfriend.

"She's dumped him," George had confided. "Said he was an outright git who couldn't magic his way out of a paper bag! We given her a job to make up for having to deal with him, but she's actually very good! Fred and I are probably going to keep her around. Of course, there are other benefits..."

Harry didn't think he should ask what those were. The twins were still grinning at him as they walked away.

Diagon Alley was not the place Harry remembered it. Many of the shops that once lined the streets were now closed, or else boarded up entirely. It was rather heart-wrenching to see Quality Quidditch Supplies looking so deserted. Florish and Blots had been emptied out, as well, to everyone but Tonk's surprise.

"Dumbledore's arranged something with a different supplier," she said, walking right past it. "It's like that for a lot of places, really. You'll order new books once you've picked out your new courses."

"What courses?" Ron wondered, trying to keep up.

"Honestly, Ron. We get to choose what courses we'll keep based on how well we did on our O.W.L.s!"

"Right! I knew that. Honest! I just..."

Ron never finished his sentence. He nearly walked right into a cart being pushed by a bespectacled old man with a nasty sneer on his face. Several things went flying off his shelves as Ron stumbled, trying to move out of the way. Tonk had to step in as the codger pulled a wand on him, and several minutes later, the old man was moving right along minus his wares. It seemed that, while most of the shops down the street were slowly vanishing, little street vendors were popping up left and right.

"He was selling phoney Dark protectors," she explained, mulling over the scattered remains skeptically. "I'll need to bring Arthur in on this, but most of this stuff is probably worthless. Still, we need to get a team in here, just in case some of this stuff is really harmful. Hagrid, can you take them back to the Burrow by yourself."

"O' course!" he said, as if there were any doubt. "Come on!"

"But we haven't been to the joke shop yet!" Ron pointed out.

"It's probably better if you don't take any detours, Ronald," Tonks said, sounding very much like Mrs. Weasley at the moment. "The plan was for all of you to have two bodyguards stationed at all times."

"But Mum was going to meet us there," he pointed out. "Besides, I was really fancying a gander."

"Alright," she said, shortly. "Just be careful!"

Harry waited until they were far out of earshot before asking. "What was that all about?"

"No idea," Rayne said, looking back. "But she acted really upset for no reason. I think it doesn't have anything to do with you, though."

Rayne paused, then looked at him. "She's a Metamorphmagus, isn't she? I thought her voice sounded awfully young."

"She's been getting older by the day," Hermione told them. "I think it's because of Sirius."

"It's nothing," Ron said quickly, giving Hermione a look. "Hermione just thinks that Tonks might've been in love with Sirius, which is kind of gross really, when you take in account the fact that they were related!"

"They were cousins, Ronald. And not even closely related, if you think about it!"

"When did this happen?" he blurted out. "I mean, when did they find the time?"

"That's just it, Harry," Hermione went on, eyeing him. "I think... well, Sirius died before she could tell him."

"Oh," was all Harry could think of to say. The idea of Tonk harboring deep feelings for Sirius as he pinned away the long hours at Grimmauld Place all by himself seemed tragic to him. By the time they reached the twins' joke shop, he was in no mood for laughs. That changed soon enough, however, as he got a closer look at what was going on. The twins' place was the only store doing any sort of real business. There was actually a crowd here, and some had taken to hanging around the outside near the windows. It was easy to understand why, once he got close enough.

The display window was packed with all sorts of gadgets and gizmos, each moving so fast that it was difficult to keep track of one thing. Pockets opened to reveal an impossible number of things crammed inside; a hat made various animals disappear and reappear in seconds, before folding itself inside out to dump fake flames on whatever happened to be close by; and a series of explosions struck the window so hard the sound almost made the glass shatter. The Weasley twins had apparently fixed this problem already by reenforcing it some way.

Kids of all ages and sizes were lined up all around. Most of them were making a terrible racket, and Harry thought he recognized one or two. As they pushed their way to the front, a hand stretched out in front of the doorway.

"Sorry!" a crisp voice said. "Wait your turn, please!"

"What?" Harry said, looking up.

A very formidable-looking woman was standing with a clipboard just to the right of the only way in. Her fat arm blocked the way, low enough that he couldn't simply slip underneath it. She was glaring at him from behind a thin pair of specacles, as though he should have known better.



"Ministry guidelines dictate that only a maximum of thirty people can occupy this space at once. Please wait your turn to enter."

"Fred and George didn't say they were doing this good!" Ron exclaimed, looking thrilled. "I bet they're both rich by now."

"It's okay," Ginny said to the lady, looking unassuming. "Fred and George are my older brothers. They asked us to meet them inside."

"Right," she said, sounding unimpressed. The witch didn't even look up from her clipboard. "Like I haven't heard that excuse four times already. Get back before I call the Aurors on you, little girl. They'll be happy to have something to do."

Ginny didn't look like she appreciated being called 'little girl'. Ron, on the other hand, was livid. "What do you mean by excuse?" he cried out. "Doesn't the red hair give you a clue?"

That got her to look up, but didn't do much good. "Not really," she brushed, calmly. "I've seen lots of little skunks with red hair today."

Ginny was reaching for her wand now, and Harry moved as if to stop her before he could think. Rayne seize him by the arm, though, and at the same time, stopped Ginny before she could draw it all the way out. The witch saw her, however, and was not amused.

"Try it, little girl," she warned. "I can have the Ministry here in half a second's time."

"Let me try," Rayne said, stepping forward. "I really should apologize, madame. But, you see, we were actually invited here on the Weasley's behalf. They had to come straight here, and we promised to stop by before leaving the Alley."

"So?" she nearly spat.

"So..." And then Rayne moved in close. "Get out of our way, unless you want the Ministry of Magic to assign the disappearance of your

body to the Department of Mysteries, because that is precisely how long it will take for them to track each piece down once I'm done with you!"

"Harry, stop her!"

Hermione's cry came too late. There was a powerful bang, and the witch slammed unconscious against the wall behind them, dropping her clipboard in the process. Silence fell across the crowd at once. The only remaining voice was that of Hagrid, who somehow had managed to fall behind.

"Excuse me, please," he breathed, coming up behind them. "What's all this, Harry?"

"Oh, nothing!" Rayne said briskly, putting her left wand away. "This lady just tripped, is all. We need to get inside so one of the Weasley twins can find out what happened."

"And that," she added quietly in Harry's ear, as they slid in through the door. "Was just with my left hand!"

The door closed behind them with the chime of a bell somewhere. No one had any inkling of what transpired outside it seemed, for it was ten times as noisy indoors. Underaged wizards even younger than the ones waiting anxiously outside were racing about up and down the aisles madly, holding devices that did everything from belch smoke to blow flames out their ears. Over in a corner, several kids were blowing bubbles with gum that allowed them to float all the way up to the ceiling. Another set elsewhere had several snack treats that resembled the Skiving Snackboxes the twins had worked on all last year, but these made your face transform into different kinds of animals. Ron snagged one in mid-air from the hand of a child with a pig's snout, and regretted it an instant later.

"I'm sure we can sort it out," Hermione told him, patting his arm.

Ron tried to talk, but apparently having a weasel mouth had rendered him incapable of speech. He spent several minutes making high-pitched squeaks and growls, before Rayne finally took pity on him,

and aimed her wand in his face. Ron looked like he would have preferred to run away, but moments later, his face was returned to normal.

"Thanks!" he said, blushing.

Hermione actually looked upset at her, but refused to say a word to him when Harry asked in private what was wrong.

"Don't worry about me," she said, sharply. "Just go back to your new best friend, and ignore the rest of us."

"Ignore you?" Harry wasn't sure he heard her right, but that was due to the commotion coming from all around. "What would... Why would I ignore you?"

"You tell me, Harry!" Hermione suddenly spat out. "Since you've shown up, all you ever do is talk about Rayne. You disappear for days on end, and there's no sign of you. People were worried about you! I was worried about you, and so was Ginny and Ron. His Mum cried for hours, thinking that something terrible had happened. And it turns out, you were just joyriding and having fun with your new girlfriend. Haven't you stopped to think about how the rest of us feel?"

"I..." Harry paused. "What does all of this have to do with Rayne? I mean, we haven't know each other long, but I trust her. And I think you should trust her, too."

"Well, I really don't think you know very much about how the rest of us think, Harry. Not lately! Not since you came back. Now, all you can do is..."

"Does this have anything to do with this morning?" he suddenly broke in.

"What? Wha.." Hermione stammered. "What makes you think... Harry, I really don't see how that..."

"Are you... jealous?" It came out of his mouth before he gave it much thought, but the damage was done.

"Jealous?!" Now, Hermione looked furious. "Let's just get one thing perfectly clear here, Harry. I am not jealous of you and Rayne, and for that matter, neither is Ronald!"

"Who said anything about Ron? What's he got to do with this?"

"Nothing!" she shrieked, but something over to the side chose to explode at that instant, so no one but him could hear. "We're just fine, Harry. Ron is perfectly fine, when he isn't fainting at the sight of Phlegm, or fantasizing about your new friend behind your back. And I'm fine without knowing how you've really been. We're all just fine!"

"Harry!"

Harry turned away from an indignant-looking Hermione to see Fred and George both swooping down in front of them. They each wore expensive brown robes that somehow clashed horribly with their red hair, turning it a dirty pond color under the bright lights.

"Come! You must witness the fruits of our labor. All of this was made possible with your generous donation. Nothing on these shelves passes to the public without your official seal of approval. That's what we're gonna put on the poster outside, just as soon as the crowd thins out a bit."

"What poster?" he wondered, looking between the two of them.

"Just a little something Fred and I cooked up to help promote the shop. We want everyone in the wizarding world to know that you helped make this place possible!"

"With your permission, of course," Fred added, winking.

"So, what do you think of things so far?" Fred pushed his way past a group of young girls that were huddled around a set of small bottles on a display case. "Love potions," he explained. "All perfectly legal, of course. Some of them pack quite a kick behind them for the first few

months, though, so you might want to consider watching your step this year at Hogwarts."

"The real money is this way, though." George steered him over to a corner that was less crowded for the moment. "We've been branching things out, taking our business to a whole new level."

"It's really all thanks to you," Fred added. "All the stuff you taught us in the D.A. got George and me thinking after our grand exodus."

"It might not look like it, but everything on this shelf has been flying out faster than we can make. We've had to place back-orders on just about everything here."

Harry looked, and saw that much of the shelf was indeed empty. A handful of items were scattered here and there, some that looked as though they'd been deliberately misshelved by people too lazy to put things back where they found them.

"Defense Devices," Fred explained, making a gesture. "Cleverly disguised prank items that can be used in the fight against You-Know-Who."

"Psychometry Quills, for example," George said, picking up a spare, haggard one. "Write with this, and no one but the person the message is intended for can read it. Great for sending secret files and info on Death Eaters. The Ministry placed an order for about fifty-cases or so. We're still behind on getting those ready."

"Ward Candles, too! The flame burns black when there is somebody untrustworthy lurking close by. A lot of parents have bought these to place around their homes."

"Anti-Disarm Charms, that help keep your wand tightly in your grip, even if Expelliarmus is cast on you."

"And best of all, Fear Owls! If something panicks you, they fly out of your pocket and explode a few feet away, giving you the chance to make a run for it."

Harry was impressed. "This is all really... incredible."

"You'd be amazed at how many Aurors and other Ministry bozos that can't do basic defensive magic under stress. We're thinking of taking this whole section and branching out. It'd mean hiring more help, though. You know anybody at Hogwarts who's looking for a job after school?"

"I am!" Ron said at once, stumbling under the weight of numerous things he'd taken from shelves.

"No," the twins said at once. "Definitely not!"

"What?"

"And you can put that stuff back in the exact same spot you found it," Fred added, threateningly. "Unless you've got the money to cough it up."

"Which comes to a grand total of twenty-seven galleons and three knuts. Since you're family, though, I guess we could drop the three knuts, but don't get used to this sort of treatment. We've got a business to run, after all!"

"That's so unfair!" he moaned.

"Life isn't fair, bro." Fred was distracted from telling Ron off further by the sound of a young boy retching several feet away. A shelf full of Skiving Snackboxes could be seen just over his head, and one was open slightly.

"No free samples!" George cried out at once, pointing his wand. "You bite it, you've bought it. Pop him the purple pill, Penelope, then ring him up at the register."

"Yes, Mr. Weasley, sir." Harry recognized Percy Weasley's old girlfriend at once, but she was gone before he had a chance to say anything. It looked like the twins had been serious when they said she was working for them. It seemed a little odd to him.

"She's a peach," Fred sighed, looking after her. "And she can balance books like you wouldn't believe! Shame all her good looks were wasted on a git like..."

"Harry!"

Ginny came running up to him, looking frantic. "Have you seen Rayne?" she asked at once. "Hagrid says something bad is happening out in the streets!"

"Bad?" he said, feeling a panic swell from inside him that had no focus.

Something outside the shop exploded, and a cry could be heard over the din. Silence fell over everyone in a breathless hush; everyone was looking from one face to the next, horrified. The panic inside his chest exploded, and Harry ran straight for the door. Someone tried to stop him, but he brushed the arm off and kept running. When he reached it, the door swung open on its own.

"Harry!" Hagrid said, grabbing him in a bear hug. "Thank goodness! We've got to get you all out of here but quick."

"Hagrid, what's happening out there?"

"Nutthin', Harry!" he said quickly, looking away. "The Aurors are already here. Best to let them do their job. We'll be able to leave just as soon as Tonks gives the word."

"What is happening, Hagrid!" he demanded.

When Hagrid didn't answer, Harry made for the door. The half-giant was much quicker than he looked, however, and had him in a grip of iron before the door was all the way open. His fingers slipped off the knob, but that didn't deter him.

"Harry," Ginny said. "It's the Death Eaters. They're attacking Diagon Alley right now."

Harry felt his body slump against Hagrid's, and the groundskeeper loosened his grip ever so slightly. "Where's Rayne?" he pleaded. "Where did she go?"

"We... don't know," Ginny admitted. "She's not in the shop. I checked."

His body went limp. Hagrid gently set him down on the floor and patted him on the back. "Tonks will find her for you," he assured him. "And then we'll get ourselves out of here! The Aurors will have this mess sorted out before ya know it."

The door burst open, and a now-familiar looking Tonks stood looking tired but alert. Her wand was still raised, and she quickly scanned the room before shutting the door behind her.

"They're being driven back, but it's a real madhouse outside. We've got to get you lot out of here! Shop's closed for today."

"There goes our sales quota," Fred muttered. "Oh, well. There's a back exit we can slip out of."

"Not without Rayne!" Harry said at once.

"What's wrong?" Tonks looked around. "Isn't she in here with you?"

Harry shook his head. "We don't know where she is!"

Tonks swore. "I'll go and look for her. Hagrid, get everyone in here out! I'll meet you all back at the Burrow."

"Follow me, all!" Hagrid cried, and made a beeline directly for the back room, knocking several shelves out of the way in the process. The various devices there were set off all at once, sending clouds of multi-colored smoke, sparkling glitter, clouds shaped like pink hearts, and icy frogs everywhere. They were, at the very least, making it difficult for anyone who might come from behind. No one could follow through this mess, it seemed.

Including Rayne.



Harry kept fighting the urge to turn back. Each time he did, something gripped his chest, and all he could see was the memory of Sirius flying backwards through the black veil again. Over and over again, he replayed the image, not paying mind to where they were going. He managed to walk right into Ron before looking up, and saw they'd come into a long, narrow hallway. Up front was a single, unassuming door.

"We go that way," he heard Fred explain. "Everyone stay close!"

"Let me go first," Hagrid said at once. "Dumbledore ordered me to make sure nuthin' happened tah any of yer."

Reluctantly, Harry followed as they were lead out into an even narrower brick alley. Sounds of the battle could be heard not far away; cries were coming up from both sides. It was not going well for some, the way the walls kept shaking. Harry found his feet were stuck to the ground.

"Harry!" Ginny called out.

Harry turned, but not because she had spoke. Another sound was coming closer, this was much more familiar. Something was slapping hard against the concrete beneath his feet, in such a way that it sent chills down his spine. Harry peered over Ginny's head, and recognized a small red ball bouncing his way.

"Go back," he said, firmly, pushing Ginny back into the shop. "Everybody, go back inside!"

"Harry..."

Before anyone could move, the whole world exploded around them. The walls that made up the alley cracked, and came crumbling down on their heads. Someone screamed, and Harry felt himself being pushed forward back through the door. He fell on top of Ginny, who was crying out for Ron.

But it was too late.

## Chapter 13

### Choices

by Ri-kun

"I'm just thankful you all are still alive!" Mrs. Weasley gasped. "I just knew something like this was going to happen. None of you should have gone out today. Death Eaters in Diagon Alley of all places!"

Mrs. Weasley paused long enough to catch her breath. She'd been raving like this for several minutes now. "Are you sure you all are alright?"

"We're fine," Hermione assured her, glancing over in Harry's direction.

Harry blinked, and didn't respond. "Harry," Molly said gently. "How about a cup of tea? It's help calm you..."

"Has there been any word?" he interrupted. "Any sign of her?"

Mrs. Weasley glanced over in the direction of her husband, who solemnly shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Harry. We still haven't got everybody accounted for yet, though. I have to say, it was a good thing everyone was able to get to the end of that alley before it collapsed! You could have been seriously injured, or worse."

"Yes," Mrs. Weasley agreed. "I still want to know why Bill hasn't sent word just yet. He could at least send an owl to let us know how things are."

"The goblins wanted all Curse-Breakers on duty," Mr. Weasley said, irritably. "They're convinced the Death Eaters were after Gringotts. Personally, I don't think You-Know-Who is interested in their treasure, and neither does Dumbledore."

"What were they after, then?"

"I really don't know, Ron. For all rights and purposes, nothing was reported missing. Dozens were injured, but it looks like this was just a

random attack to cause fear and panic. You-Know-Who isn't trying to keep a low profile these days."

The back door suddenly slammed shut, and everyone jumped. Arthur Weasley had his wand at the ready, but it was only Bill and Fleur. "You can relax, Dad," he said, as they slid into a chair together. "We wouldn't have been able to enter this place without permission otherwise, remember."

"Sorry, son!" Mr. Weasley apologized. "Can't be too careful, though."

"Glad to see you were able to make it back," Molly said, deliberately overlooking Fleur again. Harry suddenly had a thought that Molly might've wished Fleur could've been counted amongst the injured. From the look on her face, Fleur was thinking the same thing!

"Ollivander's shop was raided," Bill went on, overlooking his mother. "It looks like that was what the Death Eaters were after all this time. His whole place has been ransacked. No body was found, which means he either managed to get away..."

"Or they took him alive." Arthur Weasley looked very grim. "Which means You-Know-Who may now have a personal wandmaker at his disposal."

That, of all things, got Harry's attention. He glanced down at the wand in his hand, which had been passed through his fingers absentmindedly since they'd returned to the Burrow. The last time he and Voldemort had dueled with each other, Harry had been saved by the twin cores in his and Voldemort's wand. The connection they shared had saved his life, and allowed him to escape. If Voldemort had Ollivander on his side now to make him a new wand, however, that could mean...

"Harry, why don't you go upstairs?" Molly suggested, breaking his train of thought. "I'll bring you a nice hot cup of tea to help take your mind off things. I'm sure Rayne will turn up sooner or later."

"Yeah," Ron added, grinning. "If she could fight off a bunch of vampires, a few Death Eaters should be no problem!"

"Oh, you think so, do you?" Mrs. Weasley snapped. "Well, you can just head on up yourself. And don't think any of you will be leaving this house again before the first of September! In fact, I might just have you studying at home, young man."

Ron looked pale at the thought, but angrily complied without a word. Ginny and Hermione followed them both, but none of them went to their respective rooms. Harry was half expecting them to follow him anyway, so much so that he didn't say a word when everyone filled in behind him.

"Harry..." Hermione said in a careful voice. "I'm sure everything is going to be alright. I mean, we would've heard if she were... you know! Word would've gotten around if Rayne were dead."

"I know," he said quietly.

"She probably had to give a couple of them the slip," Ron tried. "That's why she hasn't come back yet. You told us about how she was really good at tracking and stuff."

"I know."

"And even if she can't come back right away, we'll probably get an owl from her any minute now."

"I know!"

"Harry," Ginny spoke softly. "What's wrong, then?"

Harry took a deep breath. "When we were in the alley, I thought I saw something coming from the other way. That was why I yelled for everybody to run. It made me think something bad was about to happen."

"I'd been meaning to ask you about that, mate," Ron spoke up. "That was really what saved all our lives. How'd you know?"

He paused for a moment. "Was it... you know, because of the link between you and..."

"No," he said quickly. "At least, I don't think that was it. My scar hasn't been hurting me all summer, in fact. It's weird, especially since all last year I couldn't make it stop! I didn't know there were Death Eaters until you told me."

"How'd you know, then?"

"It was the ball." Harry stopped long enough to take a very deep breath. "There was this red ball bouncing down the alley from the other direction. I've seen it before, several times. It's been showing up all over the place this summer, ever since I met Rayne."

"A red ball?" Hermione asked, confused.

"Right, a red ball, and it's usually being carried by this little girl. I think... she's been following me."

"Harry..."

"I know what I'm talking about!" he snapped, without meaning to.

"None of us aren't saying your seeing things," Ginny said, calmly. "But why would a little girl be following you around?"

"I think she's got something to do with Rayne," he admitted. "That's really what bothers me the most. Rayne disappeared, and then the Death Eaters attacked. But through it all, that same red ball keeps showing up."

"Maybe it's some kind of a warning?" Ron suggested. "What did the girl look like?"

"Kind of like Rayne," he admitted. "Younger than her, but there's a bit of a resemblance."

"Her younger sister, maybe?"

Harry looked up at Ginny. "Maybe," he said. "But why would Rayne keep her a secret? And why would her little sister be following me?"

No one had anything helpful to say. Harry was getting frustrated, but resolved himself to not take his anger out on anyone. After a few minutes of silence that seemed to stretch for an eternity, he gazed out the window and had a sudden inspiration.

"Where's Hedwig?" he demanded, whirling around. "She could get a message to her."

"Dunno," Ron said. "Haven't you seen her?"

"She's probably still out hunting. When she gets back, you can send a letter to Rayne, asking where she is. I'm guessing that's what you were planning to do."

Harry was surprised at how Ginny had figured him out so easily. "Hedwig will be back soon," was all she said. "In the meantime, I'm going to my room. Mum will be up in a little bit, just to make sure we aren't sitting around talking."

"Right," Ron said, annoyed. "Guess this means we'll talk in the morning. Night, Harry!"

"Sleep well," Hermione added, closing the door behind her. "Try not to worry. And please don't do anything reckless!"

Harry didn't lay down once everyone had left. He spent the next hour or so pacing the room, still dressed and sweat pouring down his face. Anxiety ran through his veins like a bitter poison, mixing badly with his blood. Thoughts of Rayne dominated his mind; he couldn't stop from worrying about her. She should've sent word to him by now, some sign that everything was okay. The only other explanation was that she...

Kidnapped, or dead. Either way, Harry couldn't stay here.

Something kept him from striding over to the door. Hermione's words rang in his ears as he watching it, almost willing it to fly open of it's

own accord, and saving himself the trouble of doing it. She had told him not to do anything reckless. Those same words had been said to him the day Sirius had died. She'd been trying to warn him that it was all a trap. Hermione had known something was wrong, and tried to tell him.

He hadn't listened, and his godfather paid the ultimate price!

Now, he was facing the same dilemma. Should he go, or wait and see if Rayne sent word to him. At the very least, he could sit it out until morning, but then by that point, if Rayne really was in danger, she might be dead!

He couldn't focus on one thing. Harry's mind was racing a mile a minute with thoughts. Sirius' body flying through the veil kept passing across his eyes over and over again, only sometimes, he was replaced by Rayne. Was he putting her life, and everyone else's life as well, in danger?

Was this how it was always going to be?

Harry didn't hear Hedwig when she flew through the window. It took a particularly loud shriek from her before Harry shook himself out of his thoughts long enough to realize she'd come back, and with a letter tied to her leg. Ruefully, she extended it for him to take, which took several more minutes in and of itself. Harry's hands were shaking so much that he couldn't untie it. By the time he did get it free, Hedwig had been jolted and ruffled quite a bit. Some of her feathers were even sticking out awkwardly. Disgruntled by the rough, unusual treatment, she flew off into the night again before he had time to call her back.

"Hedwig, wait!" he cried out into the night.

But, she was already gone. Harry had needed her to send a return letter, in case the message was from Rayne. The letter wasn't signed; not even with his own name to show who it was for. Hedwig had simply brought it to him. Which, he prayed, could only mean that it was for his eyes alone!

Foregoing subtlty, Harry ripped the letter free of it's envelope, and scanned the parchment. It wasn't especially long, and the words made no sense at first. Harry had to read through them twice before they cleared a little in his mind.

Fate it what is written for us.

Destiny is what we chose for ourselves.

Which will you chose?

Come and see me at

1616 Dead End Drive

London

The Splintered Broomstick

If you want to see her again...

Harry held the note in his hands, thinking hard. Finally, after several long moments that each lasted an eternity, he made his decision. Throwing the note in the trash, he strode around the bed to his trunk. Inside was the cloak and other clothes that Rayne had bought for him now a lifetime ago. He quickly undressed, and replaced them with what he wore to Knockturn Alley. They somehow made him feel more secure in what he was doing. Some of the nagging doubt that remained in his heart leaked away, leaving only a grim determination, and the barest sliver of doubt in his actions. Harry knew there was a very real possibility that he might not return.

That was why he was doing this alone.

Checking himself in the mirror, he saw that his hair had fell down around his forehead again. There was a little bit of the potion left, but not much. Harry made use of it, until he was satisfied. It now stood straight up as the night when she'd first cut it. His scar stood out proudly now, as if some kind of grotesque metal of honor. That was the only real downside to it; he had no means now of hiding his



identity. The scar was always a dead giveaway, but now it lay in front for all to see.

Still, Harry did not change it. He was going out in the matter that best suited him, as the person Rayne knew him to be.

Now fully clothed and ready, he began to prepare in earnest for his escape. For that was what he was doing, really. The Weasleys would never let him leave, and the moment Dumbledore learned he was gone, the entire Order would be looking for him again. The only hope he had was to leave quietly while everyone else was still asleep. He would have the night to put some distance between them and himself. After that...

He would dwell on it later, when and if the time came.

His Invisibility Cloak was a must. It had been a partner in crime with him for far too long for him to leave it behind. He'd made that mistake early on when he and Rayne had jaunted out together. Now, Harry was going prepared! The Sneakoscope Ron had bought him several years back would do loads good. He had the feeling that before the new day was done, there would be few people to trust. And lastly, Harry brought the Marauder's Map. It was absolutely useless to him outside of Hogwarts, but it didn't feel right somehow, leaving it behind. Harry folded it up and pocketed it, ignoring the nagging voice that pointed out over and over again that it would do him no good.

He was as ready as he'd ever be. There was no reason for him to linger any more, except perhaps to say goodbye. Harry knew that doing so would only delay him, though. Even his friends would not be happy with what he was about to do. And if Ron and Hermione didn't object, they'd at least insist on coming along again. The last time had been a disaster, with nearly all of them coming close to dying.

Harry was going to do this the same way he would one day face down Voldemort.

Alone.

Doing magic was still out of the question. He'd been too lucky avoiding the Ministry with all the underage magic he'd done in the past several weeks. And the security spells surrounding the Burrow would be looking for intruders who could Apparate, not climb down out of a window. Therefore, Harry chose the long road in his plans to escape. Using a trick he'd once caught Dudley engineering the previous summer, Harry tied together the bedsheets together in knots, until they formed a makeshift rope for him to climb down. It only made it about about a third of the way, but some quick searching of the room ended with him finding two more spare sets, which nearly reached the ground. He would still have to jump a little, but it didn't look far.

He'd left no note explaining himself. The Weasleys and Hermione would all have to guess at why he was gone. With a great deal of luck, Harry might be back before morning with Rayne in tow, but even he wasn't that optimistic. He supposed it was one of the small advantages to being an orphan. There would be no parents downstairs waiting to punish him when he got back. Voldemort, it seemed, had done him this one small favor.

Harry climbed down as quietly as he could. It was much easier to do that he'd imagined. More than once, he nearly fell. Finally, though, Harry reached the end of the line, and leaped down to the damp grass with only the slightest of difficulty. His spry Seeker body took the plunge with greater ease than he realized. Rolling to a stop and pushing himself back to his feet, Harry then strode over to the side of the Burrow where the shed lay. He remembered this once being the place where Arthur Weasley had stored the flying Ford Anglia, which he and Ron had used to fly to Hogwarts. He almost smiled a little, remembering how they'd crashed it head-on into the Whomping Willow, and later was rescued from Aragog in the black forest by it. It seemed eerie that he should be thinking of that now, with what lay ahead. But then, Harry recalled something else, something that Dumbledore had said to him.

'You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? That we don't recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble?'

It wasn't the dead that filled Harry's thoughts now, but the living. Still, the memory seemed poignant now, as he drew up on the shed. He wasn't sure at all what the future held for him; he didn't even know what he'd find once the mysterious address had been located. All Harry knew at this point was that he had to go. Rayne needed him, and Harry...

Harry needed her now more than ever.

The shed opened without any resistance whatsoever. Apparently, Mr. Weasley didn't keep it locked. There was, however, someone waiting for him as he strode inside. Harry drew his wand, but the figure already had his pointed at him. Harry squinted in the dark, and saw that it was Remus Lupin.

"I've been waiting for you, Harry," he said calmly, not lowering his wand a bit. "I thought you might come here, knowing that Rayne kept her motorcycle stored away in this shed."

"I didn't know, actually," he replied, putting his wand away. "It just seemed like the most likely place."

"You shouldn't put your wand away so soon. I could easily be a Death Eater in disguise, come to kill you."

"Maybe," he admitted. "But I'm willing to take the chance."

"Your parents trusted the wrong person, and they're dead for it. Are you so sure you want to go the same way, Harry?" There was something in the way Professor Lupin spoke that made Harry think he was talking about more than just the two of them.

"I'm going to find Rayne," he said, calmly.

"I know."

"You're not going to stop me, either."

"Are you so sure?" Lupin drew in close, then. "I could easily stop you, Harry. You're still an underage wizard, unable to do magic outside of

Hogwarts except until the more dire of circumstances, and I seriously doubt the Ministry would regard an attempt at running away from a safehouse set up for your own protection as justifiable cause!"

"You said yourself that the Ministry has too much to do these days. They didn't notice any other time!"

"Harry, the Ministry wants you now more than ever," Lupin said, growling a little. "Do you really believe for a second that Rufus Scrimgeour came here on your birthday just to enjoy cake with Molly and Arthur?! He was looking for you!"

"I guessed that. What's your point?"

"Nothing," Lupin replied. "Go back inside, Harry. Go to sleep, and forget all about Rayne. You have no idea what she truly is, or what being with her will cost you."

"I know she's a dhampir," he said, crossly. "What does that have to do with..."

"Everything!" Lupin cried, and Harry actually stepped back a little. "It has everything to do with it, Harry. She was born the result of a union that was never intended to be. Vampires do not breed the same way that wizards and other creatures do! Rayne was never meant to be!"

"Rayne's my friend!"

"Friends don't generally get caught in such compromising positions, Harry. Molly asked that Arthur and I have a talk with you about it, but in light of the recent events, I believe you got lucky and it slipped her mind."

"You told her?"

"I told her, yes. She was quite shocked, not to mention ready to throw Rayne right out the door. I have to admit, I believe she was making the right decision for you, Harry. Continued association with a being like her can only make you miserable."

"I've 'associated' with you," he pointed out. "And Hagrid. Long after people told me that giants and werewolves were purely evil and needed to be destroyed!"

"That's not the same thing!"

"How is it not?"

Lupin didn't have an answer for him. "You really are so much like James," he said, instead. Every other time Harry had heard this, it was meant as the highest of compliments. Now, he thought Lupin almost meant it as a curse. A denouement towards an utter fool.

"I'm going," he said, resolutely. "If you want to warn everybody, go right ahead. By the time you do, though, I'll be long gone for anyone to find me."

"We will," Lupin assured him. "You're not nearly as clever as you think you are."

"It took you more than a day to find me last time. I think I can manage for a little bit."

Something occurred to Harry as he swung a leg over the side of the bike. It seemed like there wouldn't be a better time to ask, so he did. "Why was I able to invite Rayne into Number Twelve Grimmauld Place? Dumbledore is Secret-Keeper, so..."

"Grimmauld Place was the ancestral home of the Black family," Lupin interrupted. "It seems that even the most powerful of charms like Fidelius cannot keep someone out when the rightful heir to it wishes for them to enter. Every charm does have its loophole, after all."

Harry looked at him, point-blank. "I asked Dumbledore," Lupin insisted. "His words, almost exactly."

"I see," Harry nodded. "Tell him I'll try to be back soon. Tell everyone that, please."

"Harry!" Lupin tried again, but he'd already brought the bike alive with a roar. Harry had never driven the machine, and only knew vaguely of its controls through observing Rayne from behind. It occurred to him that he would've been better off just taking his trusty Firebolt, but it was already too late. The moment the engine came alive, his fingers clamped around the level on the bar by pure instinct. The bike kicked up off the ground, the front wheel raising up high over his head.

Harry held on for dear life as he tore out of the shed and on into the night! Professor Lupin could be heard yelling something from far behind, but he was already halfway down the drive. Chickens squawked and dove out of the way as he roared past. Thinking desperately, he hit the flight button Rayne had used numerous times, and felt a leap of joy as the bike rose up off the roar automatically.

His heart was crying out in triumph at his success, when the engine suddenly died. As it did, the bike dove nose-first down out of the sky towards the ground. Harry gave out a cry, and tried kickstarting the bike again. It did little more than sputter half-heartedly a couple of times. Wind whipped past him as the earth came uncomfortably closer. With little else to lose, Harry drew out his wand, and smacked the dashboard over and over again.

Nothing happened.

## Chapter 14

### Raynefall

by Ri-kun

He didn't expect any sort of establishment with a name like The Splintered Broomstick to be in a respectable neighborhood. Nor did Dead End Drive seem like the sort of area he would have visited before. Therefore, Harry forewent asking for directions or looking in any phone directories. The back of the letter he'd received had a rudimentary map drawn out on it, pinpointing where he would find The Splintered Broomstick. And while Harry's road knowledge of London was sketchy at best, he was still able to navigate his way there after a fashion.

This was all, of course, after he finally regained control of the bike and kept it from plummeting to the ground far below.

His mouth felt dry as he gazed up at the building surely no Muggles had laid eyes on in years. It looked as if it'd been abandoned, which wasn't entirely out of the question. Part of the roof looked like it was caved in, as well. This seemed terribly out of place, since a wizard would have seen it for what it truly was. From the way scragglers were hurrying past, Harry thought he must have the wrong place. This did indeed appear to be a derelict building.

Still, he had come this far. Harry was determined to see it through to the end, even if it meant going in there. His chest constricted slightly as he took the first step forward, however. The Order was probably fast on his heels by now. He would have to make this quick if he wanted to find Rayne and get back to the Burrow.

As he drew in close, something strange happened. In the beginning, it almost looked like a trick of the light, and nothing more. The closer Harry got, though, it became clear that he wasn't seeing things. Even still, he took a few steps backwards just to make sure. Over in the shadows, where no one would've normally looked, a door had magically formed. It were as though the stretching panels of darkness had formed it out of themselves. He couldn't see it until he got close

enough, which suddenly explained a great deal. Grinning, he strode over to it more purposefully now, and watched as it became clearer.

The door opened at his touch, revealing a set of stairs leading downward. Harry squinted in the dim light; there wasn't much to see past the first ten steps or so, but a dim noise could be heard from somewhere lower now. Taking a chance, he stepped inside and tried not to worry when the door slammed shut on it's own behind him.

It felt like he climbed down those stairs forever, but it was actually only a couple of minutes. When he reached the landing finally, Harry found himself at the threshold of a very noisy and crowded club. A glowing sign overhead showed that this was indeed The Splintered Broomstick. Upon closer glance, he realized that it was made completely out of just that: broomsticks that'd been smashed or broken.

The entire room was filled with young witches and wizards, as well as several unsavory-looking creatures of dubious origins. Harry was suddenly reminded of the Underground where Rayne had taken him dancing. This place had a similar feel to it; in fact, it looked almost like the whole place was full of nothing but Quidditch fans. Most of the people were dressed the same as he was, with variations here and there. You could still see different Quidditch badges and support banners here and there, on both the patrons and covering the walls. Music blared out from somewhere high overhead. It sounded almost like a Hobgoblins song he'd heard Dean Thomas mention once...

All at once, Harry had the sudden idea that this might be some sort of elaborate joke. This was exactly the kind of place, after all, that Rayne might hang out in. And though she didn't follow Quidditch, it wasn't impossible for her to have lead him here. Perhaps she thought it would make for an interesting date?

Harry wasn't sure, but didn't have time to deliberate the theory any further. A much taller and skinnier wizard suddenly jumped out in front of him, holding a Puddlemere United banner in his hands. He was glaring as though Harry had said something utterly disgusting to him.



"No Freers in here!" he proclaimed in what Harry thought must've sounded like a booming voice to him.

"What?" he asked, not sure he'd heard right over the noise.

"Freers!" the pale wizard said again. "You either support somebody, or you're out of here!"

"Sorry," Harry replied. "I don't have anything with me. I was just here to meet somebody..."

"Somebody get this runt outta here!" he shouted, much louder this time. "And what's with that stupid scar on your forehead, huh? You some kind of Light supporter? We don't like Light supporters in here! I've got the mind to..."

Harry drew his wand as the wizard reached for him with his grubby hands. He didn't have time to think of a spell; it was almost as if the wand reacted on its own, casting without a second's hesitation. A bright red light struck the wizard in the chest, and sent him flying. Harry watched as the body caved into the side of the bar and slumped a little sideways. His eyes fluttered for a moment, and then he was gone.

All eyes turned to look at Harry, but none of them could have felt more shock than he did. Harry drew his wand back into the folds of his robe, and strode over to the bar silently. He could feel every pair of eyes on him, and struggled to remain calm. It wasn't easy, but when the barkeep walked over to him, he spoke in a clear voice.

"Butterbeer," he said, laying a Galleon down. "Make it two, actually."

It was a good thing he'd remembered to bring some of his wizard gold with him. Harry sipped his Butterbeer quietly and scanned the room, looking for a sign that Rayne was close by. He didn't see her anywhere, nor did anyone here look like they knew her. Apparently, if this was some kind of prank on her part, she wasn't ready to end it yet. Much to his own confusion, Harry was finding himself hoping it was a prank. The last few hours had seen him worry himself sick nearly. A prank was much preferable than the idea of something

horrible happening to him. If the Death Eaters had gotten her, then he was severely outmatched. Harry only had his wand and his wits about him against what might be an army of some of the worst Dark wizards in history ready to storm the place any moment from now.

Harry waited, and drank his other Butterbeer. The music kept right on playing, but no one approached him. He could tell he was being watched, and by more than one group of people. He supposed this wasn't too strange, however, considering the grand entrance he'd made. People were drawing out of the shadows to the dance floor now. Throwing caution to the wind, he set his Butterbeer on the counter and stood up. As he did, the unconscious wizard at his feet stirred slightly.

"Don't get up," Harry said calmly, pushing him over onto his side. "I can handle this myself."

"For the record," he added, after a couple of steps. "I'm a Victor Krum fan myself."

Harry didn't really feel like dancing much; the idea was based solely on his suspicion that he could take cover if anyone burst into the place and get lost in the crowd. That, and the fact that Rayne might join him if she were anywhere nearby. There were several good-looking witches who eyed him as he strode up. Harry smiled slightly, and began swaying to the music all by himself. Before long, three of them came up and gestured silently in a questioning manner. Harry moved back a little to let them by, but they quickly surrounded him instead.

He wondered for a second if this weren't some kind of attack, but all they did was sway to the music and dance around him. Relaxing a little, Harry let himself get lost in the moment for little while. One or two songs went by, and the witches were steadily dancing closer to him. By the time the last song stopped, each one had pressed up against a different part of his body. Harry realized then that he might be in a different kind of trouble altogether.

"Going somewhere?" one asked, sticking out a pouty lip.

"I..." Harry stammered a little. "I was just... I came here to meet someone, and..."

"Oh, you're the one she told us about!"

"Huh?" Harry wondered.

"She told us you were coming," the other witch said. "But she didn't say you were so cute! I'm kind of disappointed you're taken, now."

"Tell me about it. What's your name?"

"Harry," he said, then thinking better of it, added, "Just Harry."

"Well, 'Just Harry', Rayne's been looking everywhere for you. She said you left her alone in Diagon Alley."

"What? No, I just..."

"Don't listen to her," the second witch assured him. "She's just playing games, as usual. Rayne did ask us to keep an eye out for you, though. She told us you would be here at some point tonight. We were supposed to take you to her."

"Right. Well, can you? I mean, take me to her, that is..."

"What do you think we've been trying to do?" the third witch giggled, leading him by the arm. "She's back this way."

"Way back in the storage area."

"She wanted to talk with you in private," the first added, hurrying along ahead of them. "It was something important, she said."

"Very important."

Something occurred to him. "This is all a trap, isn't it?"

Harry stopped walking, but the other three witches didn't. "Maybe," the second admitted. "But you'll never really know unless you come with us."

"Rayne really is back there," said the third, twirling her hair. "Witch's oath on that. But, you might find something else you weren't expecting."

"You're kidding? All three of you expect me to just walk back there like this conversation never happened."

"How did you guess it was all a trap?" the first asked, instead. "I thought we were doing pretty good."

"You were," he nodded. "At least, in the beginning, anyway. But I've had this sort of thing happen once or twice."

The three witches turned around as they reached the storage door and cocked their heads sideways at him. "You really are him, then?" the middle asked. "You are Harry Potter, aren't you? I thought maybe the little girl was just making it up!"

That got his attention. "Little girl?!" he exclaimed. "One bouncing a red ball?!"

"I didn't see a red ball," the first said, cautiously. "But yeah, maybe."

Harry stood there for maybe half a second. "Let me through!" he demanded, finally. "Let me in there, now!"

All three stood out of the way, as if they'd timed it perfectly. "Good luck, Harry Potter!" one called out as the door slammed shut behind him. "Good luck from all three of us."

The moment the latch clicked, Harry felt the floor give way beneath him. At first, he thought he had fallen down some kind of trap door, but the hard landing that came immediately after told him he'd simply had his legs kicked out from underneath him. Raising up with his wand at the ready, he found himself quickly surrounded. There were hooded figures standing as though they'd Apparated without making

a sound. Harry tried to get to his feet, but one of them kicked his wand away. His hand stung from the strength behind the blow as his only means of protection clattered away.

One of the Death Eaters reached for him, but Harry quickly scrambled away. Two of them off to the side weren't as close together, so he tucked in low and tried to escape through their legs. It almost worked, but one was far too quick. Even for all his finely-tuned Quidditch reflexes, Harry was no match for him. As he was flipped over onto his back, Harry did manage to get a closer look in the face of his assailant. He'd been expecting a mask underneath the hood. He thought perhaps he would find himself staring into the face of Bellatrix Lestrange or Draco Malfoy's father, but it was none of them. The vampire that snarled when Harry kicked his foot out did appear familiar to him, but the realization that these weren't Death Eaters had filled his mind for the moment, leaving him little space to dwell on anything else.

They were all vampires, it seemed. Each one pulled its hood back as he was raised up off his feet. One of them came in close and took a whiff near the pulse of his neck, making his skin crawl. Harry spat directly between the slimey bloodsucker's eyes in retaliation, but all that served was to make him angrier.

Before the vampire could return the favor, however, a bolt of red light sailed through the air, missing Harry's ear by a hair's breath. The light struck him directly over its still heart, sending him flying backwards into the wall. Harry turned to where the Stunning spell had come from, but only saw a flicker of something move behind the curtain of shadows. His heart leaped in hope anyway as another spell struck the other vampire closest to him. Harry seized this opportunity to leap out of the way. Two more blasts took out more vampires, allowing him enough time to take cover.

Harry scanned the ground in search of his wand as cries swelled up from all around him. Something was apparently diving down upon the vampires from high up in the rafters, taking them on one at a time. They were moving far too fast for his human eyes to see, but Harry still had a vague idea as to whom it might be. Just as he located his wand, the room fell silent. Harry raised up, and spotted Rayne

standing in the center of a pile of bodies laying around her in a circle. Both of her wands were drawn out and smoking.

Forgoing his own wand, he leaped up and raced towards her. She did not move as he approached, but Harry didn't care. Throwing his arms around her, Harry breathed in her scent as he fell into a desperate embrace.

"Rayne, where have you been?" he moaned into her. "I've been looking for you... There were these weird letters saying all kinds of crazy things, and then I got one from Hedwig that said you would be here. But these are the same vampires that attacked us in Surrey, and I think there's somebody else..."

Harry paused. "Rayne?" he questioned, raising back. "Is something... wrong?"

There was a flicker of movement just off to the side. Harry didn't have time to react, and suddenly he was flying through the air. When he finally did land, it was many feet away, and his entire body was sore all over from the blow. Rayne was stalking towards him slowly, as though she had singled him out to be her prey.

"Rayne..." he breathed, getting up. "What's wrong with you? What have they..."

The spell hit him somewhere in his gut. Harry doubled over in agony as something foul and unpleasant spread through him in the space of an instant. His eyes clouded over with unshead tears as his body began to sweat profusely. Something hot boiled in his blood. There was a terrible taste in his mouth that somehow managed to carry over everything else, but only a little.

Then, everything was gone.

"Now! Now!" a young voice carried over through the darkness. "Remember to play nice with our new friend, little Rayne."

Something hit the ground, and Harry turned automatically to find the little girl smiling sweetly his way. In her hands was a red ball, and with

every step she took, it struck the ground and bounced back up to her hands.

"My name is Yuzuho," she said in an innocent voice. "We've met before, Harry."

"Who are you?" he demanded, getting up again. "What have you done with Rayne? Why is she acting like this? Tell me!"

"Boys are so noisy," she said, as if he'd just sworn in front of her. "Rayne, teach this mean boy a lesson right now."

Rayne was in front of him; Harry didn't have time to contemplate why. She had doubled a fist up and rammed it right into his stomach, sending shockwaves of pain through him. Harry bent over again, and was thrown back as she sent an uppercut that raised him up off his feet. Landing, Harry looked up at her, dazed.

"Rayne!" he begged. "Please, it's me! Harry!"

"She can't hear you," the girl called Yuzuho said, calmly. "I've made sure of that."

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded once again, this time staying down. "You've been following me since the day she and I met. Why?!"

Yuzuho giggled. "Silly Harry! I've been following you for much longer than that. Since the day Rayne laid eyes on you a year ago, I have been there with her, watching you and waiting for the right moment."

"You... you're controlling her. But how?"

"Rayne is a part of me. I've always been able to control her, even when she was a little tiny baby. Everything she did back then was because of me telling her. No matter how bad it was, Rayne always listened."

Yuzuho paused, then, and Harry had the sudden feeling that her silence wasn't a good thing. "Then, one day, she stopped listening to

me. She didn't want to play with me anymore. She said that I was a bad girl, and had to be punished. It was very dark in that cave, you know. That was where she put me; in a cave down by the sea where no one would ever find me, or play with me again. I hated it there!"

Yuzuho touched her chest. "She missed it. Almost got me, but I was able to stop her at the very last second. Only damaged my heart, instead of going through, so my body didn't completely die. My spirit was still there, but I couldn't move. No one could hear me, so they assumed I was dead. It really did feel like I was dead lying in there for so long. I really didn't like it! Rayne didn't realize she'd missed, or she'd have made sure."

"They found me after a very long time. Two little boys lost and waiting for the sun to go down. They could hear me, at last, and did what I told them to do. The only thing I'd thought about for the longest time was finding Rayne, and making her feel bad for what she'd done. It wasn't easy, since Rayne had run away from me by that point. She didn't stay at home like a good little girl. No, she had to go home to where her father was, even if she didn't realize it."

A cruel grin covered her face then, contrasting harshly with the young face. It made Harry's skin crawl.

"Tom-Tom won't have anything to do with her, though. He never wanted her; nobody wants her except for me."

Harry watched Yuzuho's face carefully, hoping against hope that he'd heard her wrong. "What did you say? Rayne's father is..."

"Tom-Tom was such a naughty boy," she giggled again, holding her red ball tightly. "He came to me years and years ago, looking for a secret. He thought I might know how to give it to him, and him not lose his precious magic! Wizards love their magic; it's why they don't become like me. But I wouldn't give it to him, at least not for free. He had to give something over to me in exchange, so we played a different kind of game. And in the end, he got to play with some of my friends, and I got to keep Rayne all to myself."



Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. It had to be a mistake! Rayne couldn't possibly be the daughter of...

"It's all true!" she snapped, as if he'd spoken aloud. "You can't hide things from me. I've been watching you for many months, Harry Potter, and I know all of your dirty little secrets. Boys always think they can hide things from girls, but they're wrong!"

"You did all of this," he whispered weakly. "The dreams... the letters... all of it?"

"The dreams were just to get your attention," she shrugged. "The letters were to get you to trust me."

She was sounding much older now, somehow. "What do you want?"

Yuzuho walked up to stand next to Rayne in front of him. "To be where you both are. I cannot touch the world; only you see and hear me as if I were whole and real. My body is just a memory left behind. Others watch over me while I sleep."

"You're like a ghost? But, I remember touching you before. How can that be?"

"Who knows?" she said, smiling in a coy way that reminded him of Rayne way too much. "Maybe you're not as much of a good boy as you think!"

Harry fought for control of himself; he fought with everything he had. Finally, he could feel his body enough to stand. Rayne was looking straight ahead the whole time, as though Harry weren't there. Her eyes, her whole face and body, gave off the impression that she was somewhere else.

"Rayne," he pleaded. "Come back to me."

"Only if you do something for me," Yuzuho spoke again. Harry glared at her, but listened.

"There is something that you have which I want. If you give it to me, I'll allow you and Rayne to play together. You can even finish playing your game, the one you never got to finish before. I'll leave you both alone in exchange for it."

"What?" Harry demanded. "Gold? Money?"

"No, silly! The Heart of Grindelwald."

That made him hesitate. "I don't know what that is."

"No," she admitted, nodding. "I suppose you don't. But you really don't need to, not for what I have in mind. Just go back to the place where the two of you stayed after I let you escape. I can see it, but no one can go there but you two. If you get it for me, Rayne can play with you again."

"The Heart of Grindelwald," he repeated, as if memorizing the name.

"Yes," Yuzuho said, skipping. "But it's also called the Heart of Darkness."

## Chapter 15

### The Heart of Grindelwald

by Ri-kun

Harry was led out of the underground club by two vampires and an unfamiliar girl who grinned his way every few minutes like she knew him. Once they were out on the street, Yuzuho appeared suddenly on a corner just down the road near an alley, and gestured for him to follow. The vampires seemed to sense what she wanted without looking that way, and turned with him. When they reached there, Rayne was waiting along with her, still as blank-faced as before. A strange thought occurred to him as he gazed desperately at her, that she looked almost like she'd been Imperiused.

"I'll let my bad girl go and play with you, Harry," Yuzuho said at once. "She won't talk with you; I've told her she isn't allowed. It's punishment for running away from mother all those years ago."

"Please," he whispered. "Just... let her go. I'll get you the Heart, but leave her out of this."

"Silly Harry!" she giggled. "Rayne was always a part of this, and so were you. Neither of you realized it, is all."

"Bring me the Heart," Yuzuho then said in a very different, commanding voice. "Bring it to me if you want her to live!"

"I don't know if anyone but me can get inside."

"Of course." Yuzuho shrugged, like it should have been obvious. "Old wizard magic protects the place. Rayne can only come with you when you invite her in. But I'm going to have her wait outside, where she can't cause any problems. Rayne loves getting into trouble, for some reason. She's a lot like you, Harry."

Harry looked up at Rayne, who only stared ahead as if she weren't really there. He felt his heart clench, and wondered whether this hadn't been predicted as well; that everyone he came to love would

meet some terrible fate at some point. Was this all a part of being the Champion?

"Follow him to the Heart," Yuzuho was telling the other vampires, meanwhile. "Don't hurt him, though, unless he decides to be bad. Then, you can punish him, but only a little bit. I want both of them alive and well when I finally come back. Then..."

Yuzuho paused, again. "It's playtime."

"Wait!" Harry cried out. "The Heart will be guarded. You have to believe me."

"Don't lie!" Yuzuho scolded. "Bad boys who lie get punished."

As if on cue, the scars covering his right hand tingled. Harry had a sudden flash of himself sitting at a desk a lifetime ago, scribbling down the same words that were now etched into his skin on a piece of parchment. Words that were written in his blood.

That same blood now began to boil as his anger rose to the surface. "I'm not lying," he told her. "We can go to where the Heart is, but you won't be able to go in. Only I can do it, and there's a very real possibility that the Order of the Phoenix will be waiting for me."

"The Order of the Phoenix?"

"Professor Dumbledore's secret army," Harry explained hurriedly. "He created it to fight Voldemort."

Harry still couldn't believe what Yuzuho said about Rayne being his daughter. It seemed too far-fetched. "She really is from him," Yuzuho assured, as if reading his mind again. Then again, Harry reasoned that wasn't impossible. Resolutely, he tried to seal away his emotions.

"The Order's base is..."

Harry's throat then closed up on him. The words were somehow stuck in his throat, and no amount of force could make them come

out. Harry spent several minutes gagging on them before finally giving up. The instant he did, his throat cleared away. Clearly, the Fidelius Charm was still in effect. He could bring Rayne in as a guest of his new home, but no one else could know about the true purpose behind it.

"I can't tell you," he breathed. "A magical charm prevents me from revealing any information about it. I can take you there, and Rayne could come with me because she knows already, but no one else."

"You're a very sweet boy," Yuzuho cooed. "Thinking of my little girl so much, but it's really all for nothing. I know you want to be alone with her, in the hopes that she'll remember everything. You have to understand that I've always been there, hiding behind her eyes. I can see everything, even if silly wizard magic won't let me tell anyone."

"If the Fidelius Charm affects you," he countered. "Sending vampires with me won't make a difference. They still won't see the place, and cannot get in without an invite."

"I could make you," she said calmly. "You will not risk defying me. My little Rayne means far too much for you to risk her life now. And haven't you already risked the life of somebody else that you love, dear boy?"

Harry froze. "Still," Yuzuho went on. "I suppose I could allow you to go alone, if that is what you truly want. Rayne can stay here with me and keep me company. We'll play all our old games together just like we used to until you get back. That way, I'll know you won't be taking your time."

Harry looked hard at Rayne, but saw nothing behind her eyes. "Don't hurt her. Just don't hurt her, and I'll do whatever you want."

"Ned will go with you," she said, gesturing to the girl standing not so far away. "He likes to play as a girl from time to time, but if you try to do something silly, he'll fix you up real good. So, be a good boy, Harry."

Ned the girl giggled, as if on cue. "Let's go, Harry!" she hissed. "Time is wasting."

Harry had to grit his teeth the whole time they rode through the back streets of London. Ned insisted on riding what he called 'shotgun', wrapping his arms around Harry's waist from the back seat. It made him sick to his stomach to have the little beast clutch at him that way. More than once, he resisted the urge to turn around and wrench right in his face. Ned didn't stay a girl for very long. About halfway there, she changed back into a male, but not the same form that Harry had first seen him in. This guise looked much taller and thinner, more like the vampires he'd studied in the Defense Against the Dark Arts books.

That didn't mean Ned ceased tormenting him. Every few minutes, Harry felt the vampire brush up against him in an unpleasant way. Finally, Harry had enough and turned the bike hard. Ned wasn't prepared for the action, and flew right over his head. The new form he'd shifted to didn't weight quite as much, it seemed. He rolled several feet away before stopping, and that was only because of a street lamp getting in the way. The clang that rang out in the night echoed for what seemed like miles. Several lights in the distance flickered on, and a dog barked angrily at the disturbance. Harry grinned once, then kickstarted the bike again and rode off without him.

Grimmauld Place wasn't much further. Harry rode up to it and killed the engine at once. He was at least beginning to manage the bike better, so long as it was on the ground. Driving it wasn't anything like riding a broomstick!

Just as he climbed off, something swooped down out of the sky to meet him. Harry had his wand ready in an instant, and took aim. Before he had time to think of a spell, lights burst out from the tip and struck the figure, exploding like fireworks on contact. The racket alone was enough to make his ears buzz. The figure rolled to a stop, and shifted to a much smaller form. This figure stood up and glared at him.

"Nice try, Ned," Harry said calmly, moving away from the bike. "Didn't your 'mother' tell you not to hurt me?"

"I'll do much worse than simply hurt you once you've brought me the Heart!" he raged.

"Sorry," he replied, stepping forward as Number Twelve became visible to him between the mismatched buildings. "I promised Yuzuho that I'd bring the Heart back to her, not give it to you. Guess that means you're out of luck."

"I can always just take it from you," he challenged. "The minute you step out of that place, I'll have it in my hands. Then, Yuzuho will honor me, and I'll become the new King of the Vampires."

"Assuming she doesn't kill you for disobeying her," Harry pointed out. "I know her type, and they don't like being disobeyed for any reason. Besides, you can't even see the part of the building I'm going into. The Fidelius Charm makes it impossible for anyone to see."

"I'll..." Ned grumbled. "Wait, where is it?"

Harry snorted. "Like I'd tell you! So long, Ned."

Harry stepped through the barrier and up the steps to the doorway. The door opened at once as his hand touched the knob. Keeping his wand out, Harry entered ever so carefully, keeping an eye out for trouble. The place looked as deserted as it'd ever been. It didn't feel as though the Order had moved back just yet.

Once he was sure no one was lurking about ready to jump him from behind, Harry headed up the stairs to the room where he remembered leaving the Heart at. Each footstep seemed to rebound off the walls, sounding twice as loud each time. By the time he got to the top, Harry was sure everyone in London had heard him, even though magic surely made that impossible.

The room was exactly as he'd left it. The bed had not been made up at all, which would make sense considering Kreacher now resided at Hogwarts. Not that the house-elf had been particularly good at keeping the place tidy, anyway. The portrait of Nigelus Phineas was empty at the moment, which was a good thing. Harry had wondered if

the former headmaster might alert Dumbledore of his presence out of sheer spite. That was one problem solved, at least.

The Heart of Darkness wasn't on the dresser, though.

Harry searched all over the room for it upon realizing that it was gone. He turned the entire room upside down, but there was no sign of it. He even went so far as to take the bed apart and look under the mattresses, as unlikely as it was that the Heart would be there.

The dresser was too heavy for him to move by himself. Harry spent a good minute or two struggling with it anyway, before it dawned on him that he could simply levitate the thing out of the way. The fact that this didn't occur to him before now made him stop and laugh for a moment. It was risking more underage magic, of course, but the thought hadn't worried him for some time. The concerns of the Ministry had ceased to worry him long ago. Harry raised his wand and quickly shifted the heavy dresser to the left, in front of Nigellus' portrait.

But the Heart wasn't back there!

Harry was dejected, but before he could take his frustration out on every inanimate object in the room, a voice rang out.

"It was never back there, Harry, I'm afraid."

Harry turned and found Professor Dumbledore standing in the doorway to the room. A small package lay in his hand, which had somehow been reduced to a blackened cinder. The fingers were gnarled up around it, as though permanently forced to clutch the thing laying within. Harry had a sudden inspiration as to what lay within, but his concern for the headmaster broke through.

"Professor," he said, standing up straight. "Your hand..."

"A small occupational hazard, Harry," Dumbledore responded quickly, dismissing Harry's concern. "Nothing more, I'm afraid."



"You found the Heart of Darkness," he said, calmly. "I thought maybe..."

"It was right where you left it. Phineas informed me the moment you arrived, and I brought it straight away. I had hoped you might come to one of the Order members for help, but it seems not."

"This is my problem," he replied. "I want to fix it on my own."

"Even at the expense of putting yourself in terrible danger, Harry?"

"My life isn't as important as hers. You must know about Rayne by now, if Phineas was the one who told you where to find it."

"I do," he admitted. "Though, for once, it seems that you have the inside information, and I am forced to make guesses as to what will happen next. In this, our roles have reversed for once."

"Please," he asked, extending his hand. "Give me the Heart, sir."

"Harry..." Dumbledore was smiling kindly at him. "Do you really believe that you are a match for a being like Yuzuho? Legend speaks of her in her country the same way ours talks of Lord Voldemort. It was a union that never should have been."

"That's just what Professor Lupin said."

Dumbledore seemed stunned by this for a moment. "You know about Yuzuho, then?" Harry pressed. "Tell me, then. What's she doing here, and why does she need Rayne so badly?"

"If I tell you..."

"I'm doing this whether you tell me or not, sir," he interrupted. "But knowing what I'm going up against will help me to survive."

Harry watched as the headmaster stared into his eyes, and sighed. "Yuzuho was only ten years old when she was made into a vampire. Even in their circle, this is forbidden. I do not know her whole story, but there is enough evidence to suggest she was mistreated long

before running afoul of the creature that turned her. I believe becoming undead must have driven the poor child completely out of her mind. The rest, for a while at least, was history. Yuzuho rose to become the most feared and powerful vampire queen the world has ever known."

"She was especially famous for her cruelty and malice. Most of her actions had very little sense behind them, at least in a rational way. Yuzuho spread cruelty and punishment for the simple sake of it, without any regard for her own people. It was believed for a time that her armies might swell large enough to affect other parts of the world, but it never happened. Yuzuho was apparently content to bring ruin upon her own land and nothing more."

"Then, she came across Lord Voldemort, then still going by the name of Tom Riddle. I believe you can guess at what happened next. Tom wanted to research for a way to become immortal through vampirism without sacrificing his magic. Wizard magic is a gift for the living only, and he was not willing to give it up, even for the promise of realizing his dream. Yuzuho exploited this, and offered him a bargain. In exchange for doing a very complicated magical ritual that would mystically transfer Tom Riddle's essence into her, Yuzuho would allow him to experiment on some of her less important vampire servants."

"Why did she need Rayne so badly?" Harry wondered.

"The dhampir are said to be legendary warriors," Dumbledore explained. "They are the creatures that even vampires live in fear of. With one as her daughter and chief enforcer, empowered by the added strength of a wizard of Tom Riddle's skill, Yuzuho would never fear being dethroned. And so she wasn't, until Rayne began to finally fight off her mother's influence. I understand the battle was costly, but in the end, Rayne plunged a stake through Yuzuho's heart. Yuzuho was still able to affect her mind enough that her daughter's hand shifted at the last second. Yuzuho's heart was damaged, but not completely destroyed. And there her body and spirit remained for several years, separated but still a part of the world."

"Two vampires looking for refuge from the sun came across her one day, and the rest you know. She arrived in this country shortly afterwards, searching for Rayne. We cannot be sure if her fascination with you is because of your connection to Lord Voldemort, or some other reason. The possibility that you still have some role to play in her design is too great, Harry, and that is why I must insist that you..."

"Accio Heart!" Harry cried out.

The Heart of Darkness flew from Professor Dumbledore's mangled hand into Harry's. He caught it with ease, and felt the Heart pulsate slightly through the parcel that contained it. The heat coming from inside still made his skin prickle as he slipped it into his cloak pocket.

"Harry," Dumbledore said sternly. "You are clearly no match for me. I must insist that you remain here while the Order regroups."

"I'm going to find Yuzuho," he stated. "And then, I'll free Rayne from her influence. Whether you and the Order try and stop me or not, I'm finishing things one way or the other."

"Does this mean I can come by into my rightful ancestral home now?" Phineas's head appeared around the dresser and glared at Harry. "I'll thank you to remove this obstruction at once, young man! The nerve of children these days, thinking they can move furniture around without asking first."

"I asked that he not reveal himself to you until I arrived," Dumbledore explained. "I was hoping you'd be more accepting of help, Harry."

"Children think they know everything, Dumbledore!" Phineas went on. "I'm certain the boy thinks he doesn't need your..."

Harry waved his wand, and the portrait flew out from behind the dress and into a wall. There was the sound of a splat, then several angry words muffled by the wall that Harry was sure he didn't need to hear. Looking up at the headmaster, Harry met Dumbledore's probing stare with even eyes.

"You won't fight me, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "You have no chance."

"Maybe," he admitted. "But, neither do you."

Age seemed to fall over Dumbledore in an instant. It was like Harry watched him become older, impossibly older, in the blink of an eye. There was suddenly a frail and aged man standing before him, opposed to the wisened and clever headmaster who never seemed to truly age. It saddened Harry, but he made himself harden his heart. There was suddenly a chasm between them that hadn't been there before.

Or perhaps, Harry simply hadn't noticed it until then.

"I'm going," he said, moving slowly towards the door.

Dumbledore did not move to stop him. As Harry walked past, he wasn't sure the headmaster really knew he was leaving. As Harry walked out the door, he felt as though he were leaving a big portion behind. Something seemed to fill the gap almost at once, but he still mourned it's absense. There wasn't time to ponder it's meaning, or work out what it meant for him, though. Rayne was waiting for him.

As if in response to the thought, the Heart gave another twitch. Harry froze in his steps as his scar burned in time with it. The pain ceased all at once, just as the Heart grew still. He waited to see if the Heart would move again, but it never did. Likewise, the scar did not pulsate on his forehead. Once he was sure of this, Harry made for the stairs again.

Rayne was waiting for him, but so was Yuzuho. It was time he had a talk with her.

There was still the matter of how to get out of Grimmauld Place, of course. Ned the vampire would undoubtedly be waiting for him the moment he exited, and the Fidelius Charm could not protect him very far. It would have been simple if Harry knew how to Apparate, but they wouldn't start lessons on it until this year sometime. There was

always the Floo Network, but the Order was probably having it watched, not to mention the Ministry of Magic.

Harry knew he was running out of time. There was no telling what Yuzuho was doing to Rayne in the meanwhile, and thinking about it threw his mind into panic. He needed to find a way out that wasn't detectable.

The answer, of course, was obvious!

## Chapter 16

### Escape and Epiphany

by Ri-kun

It went much better than Harry expected. He honestly didn't believe it would be as easy as it was, though by the time he emerged, the vampires had almost quadrupled in number. They were standing around his bike, watching the space where he stood on the top step covered in the Invisibility Cloak. Though they could not see him due to the Fidelius Charm, that would vanish the moment he walked down the stairs. He'd known that in advance, which was why he put on the Cloak first.

The plan was fairly simple. Harry already had all the protection he needed; it just didn't extend far enough on it's own. To make matters even easier, the vampires had no way of knowing when he would emerge. They apparently didn't know about his Cloak, which meant Rayne must not have given the information away. This gave him a sense of hope, especially considering the enormous task he was about to take. Harry still had no idea of any of this would work.

All he could do, in the end, was try.

Under the Cloak, Harry quietly crept down off the last step and out of range of the Charm preventing Grimmauld Place from being seen. None of the vampires looked his way as he softly walked out of their line of sight. They'd planned far ahead enough to guard the motorcycle, at least.

Harry kept to the shadows as he moved around them, coming closer and closer to his goal. As he approached the bike from behind them, one of the vampires turned sharply. Harry didn't recognize his face, but the moment it spoke, he knew who it was.

"He's here!" Ned hissed, sniffing the air angrily. "He'd close by. I can smell him."

"I don't see anybody," another replied, scratching his head. "Are you sure?"

"I'd know that stench anywhere. The little snipe must've somehow found a way to make himself invisible. Spread out and look for him!"

"Do we take him alive, then?"

"No!" Ned practically screamed. "I want him dead. Let the demon mother think he perished. All that really matters is we get the Heart of Grindelwald. Vampires across the world would give their necks in exchange for it. If she's not happy, we'll seek asylum with them!"

"Right. Have it your way, then?"

Harry kept himself very still. He didn't trust himself to breathe loudly as they began spreading out in different directions, sniffing the air cautiously. At least none of these vampires could track him by scent. Only Ned had that ability, and he hadn't moved an inch so far. Harry had hoped the vampire might join the search. Ned seemed more content to bark orders and wait for news, though. For a moment, Harry couldn't help but picture him as a potions master. The comparison was actually quite accurate.

"Where is he?!" Ned howled. "I know he must be nearby."

"I'm right here, Ned." Harry pulled his Cloak off and raised his wand simultaneously. All the vampires froze in their tracks as he leveled the tip at Ned's throat. Ned, meanwhile, was watching it rather than him, as the tip began to glow a soft, yet angry red. Harry's hand didn't tremble in the slightest; his eyes leveled on the creature of the night standing in front of him, barring the path to his only means of transportation.

"I've been standing next to you for the past ten minutes or so," Harry spoke, clearly. "You couldn't even tell which direction I was downwind from! That's really sad."

Ned apparently wasn't open to constructive criticism. "Who do you think you are, whelp? Hand over the Heart, or we'll tear you limb from limb!"

"Not likely," he replied. "See, if there's one thing I've noticed about you in the last couple of weeks, it's that you don't like magic. You're afraid of it; afraid of having it used against you. You can't use magic yourself, not with a wand, anyway. That's why you haven't come near me. You know what I can do to you if you try."

"Give me the Heart!" Ned cried again.

"Sorry, no. I was bringing it to someone else, and she's not going to like what I have to tell her about you, I think. Now, I haven't heard anyone else cheering you on about your little plan to go running off to the highest bidder. Granted, no one protested, but they don't seem too thrilled with the idea of scamming Yuzuho. If she's as bad as I've heard, I really can't say I blame them, either! So, this is what's going to happen..."

Harry took a deep breath. "You're going to move out of my way so I can get on my bike and drive out of here. No one tries to stop me, and in return, I don't summon enough fire to roast everyone to chimney ashes! If you're willing to play along, Yuzuho never has to find out about you trying to double-cross her. Deal?"

Ned considered Harry for a moment. "Go to hell!"

Harry felt his hand tremble then, ever so slightly, but he forced himself to keep still. He stared into Ned's eyes for a moment, willing himself to do whatever he had to. Ned didn't move, didn't so much as flinch, as the tip of his wand burned brighter.

"Wait!"

A vampire approached him quickly, but before Harry could train his wand onto him, he dropped down to his knees and looked up imploringly. "Please, Master Potter," he begged. "All the rest of us want is for Yuzuho to return to us. If you swear to take the Heart directly to her, we will not allow this one to interfere."



That got his attention. "You are sure?"

"We swear on the black blood that made us what we are," he nodded. "This one will never cross your path again."

Something occurred to him then, and though he needed to leave now before anyone decided to change their mind, it felt wrong. Foolish or not, Harry Potter had to know. "Why do you serve Yuzuho? She doesn't seem to care for anyone."

"Yuzuho has sworn to give us sanctuary. If we follow her, she will ensure that we never need fear wizards or their magic again. All we want is to live freely in the night as we once did, long ago."

The words struck a cord in him, and Harry wished immediately that he hadn't asked. They sounded way too familiar somehow.

"I will take the Heart to Yuzuho," he swore, nodding.

"Then we have no quarrel with you," said the vampire, standing. "Leave freely, and take the Heart to her waiting chest."

Harry ran past Ned and leaped up onto the bike. The moment he came near the shapeshifting vampire, he tried to reach for him, but was seized at once by seven or eight pairs of clawed hands. Harry gave a nod of thanks in their direction before kicking the bike to life. The engine roared as he peeled away down the street. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Ned being pushed to the ground as a swarm of angry undead monsters descended on him. In the background, Harry saw Number Twelve Grimmauld Place slipping back under the cover of the Fidelius Charm. Before it disappeared completely, though, he made out a single figure looking out from a curtained window, watching him depart.

Dumbledore didn't wave goodbye to him as he drove off. He merely let the heavy-looking curtain fall back into place as the house faded from sight completely. Harry turned back to the road and forced himself to pay attention to where he was going. He still needed to get back to the club, and that was only the beginning of the problem.

At least Rayne had taught him one thing, however. He could never had fought off that many attackers at once, especially when they outmatched him in terms of size and strength. Only his wits and determination had gotten him this far. That was something he could be thankful for.

Even if the worst occurred, and she never regained her sense of self, or remembered who he was.

"You have the Heart?"

Harry held out the carefully wrapped parcel in his hand, keeping his dominant wand hand free just in case. The vampire merely drew in close to inspect the grubby package for a moment, before inhaling the air around it. A shiver went up his spine as he threw his head back.

"Death," the vampire hissed, pleasantly. "It reeks of Death. I'd never really believed the stories surrounding it."

"Do you want it?" Harry asked. He was eager to be rid of the hated thing, in all honesty. It had throbbed and pulsated in his cloak pocket the entire drive back. More than once, Harry had the irresistible urge to toss it to the side of the road like a piece of garbage. Only thinking of Rayne kept the impulse at bay.

"I was instructed to lead you to the waiting room," the large vampire replied. He had a rumbling voice, as though some giant blood had been in his family many generations ago. "The Heart is to remain with you until it is time to perform the ritual. Follow me."

Harry did so, however reluctantly, and soon found himself in a small room off to the side. It was surprisingly well-furnished, as though someone had been expecting company in advance, and pulled out all the stops. There was even a fireplace set against the far wall. Flames were rushing out of it, and kneeling against it in the light cast by the flames was a familiar figure. Harry's heart leaped up into his throat as he recognized her at once.

"Rayne!" he cried out, and rushed for her.

Rayne was standing and facing his direction before he could blink. The sudden movement made him pause, and he slowed down to a stop before reaching her. There was no recollection in her face; nothing in her eyes suggested that she knew him, or even where she was.

"The dhampir will not harm you," the vampire behind him spoke. "She has no memory or sense of self, but you are safe here so long as the Heart remains undamaged. I will leave you to be alone with her, as I was instructed. Farewell."

The vampire was gone, but Harry didn't notice. He couldn't tear his face away from the woman standing in front of him. His heart beat a thousand times in just a few seconds, watching her not move. She didn't recognize him, nor did she give any kind of notice that he was in the room. All Rayne did was stand there, facing his general direction, and wait.

"Rayne," Harry spoke softly. "Can you hear me?"

Nothing happened. Harry took a tentative step closer, and when she didn't lash out at him, decided that was good enough. Slowly, Harry approached her, taking great care to watch for any change in her expression. Her body was held relaxed, yet rigid, as if she were preparing to attack. This didn't help to encourage him, but he pressed on anyway.

Finally, Harry was standing directly in front of her. "Rayne," he whispered again, more urgently. "Rayne, it's me! It's Harry, Rayne. You need to snap out of it. We've got to find a way out of here, and I'm not leaving you here alone. Do you understand?"

Nothing. "Please, Rayne!" he begged. "I need you. I need..."

Her hand suddenly jerk upward at lightning speed, and grabbed him by his throat. Harry coughed, tried to jerk away, but only succeeded in flailing about for a second. Rayne's fingers were like iron as she held him close, sniffing the air close to him. When she brought his

throat near her mouth, he instinctively tried to get away. Rayne held him fast, though, and sniffed the skin just above where his pulse pounded rhythmically.

Harry let his whole body go slack. "Go ahead," he told her, quietly. "Go ahead, Rayne. If you really want to..."

All the fight had gone out of him. Harry waited for the pain that would signal her fangs piercing his skin, but it didn't come. Rayne's face pressed close to where his heart beat there, but she didn't take blood. All Rayne did was sniff the skin over and over again.

"...arry?"

"Rayne?"

"...arry Pott..."

Harry tried to raise back a little, and found that he could. Rayne's grip on him had loosened enough to look her in her eyes. There was a dim light there now. Not much, but a glimmer of recognition shown. Harry wanted to shout for joy, but held himself in. Rayne blinked a few times, and as if she were rising up slowly out the surface of a dark pool, emerged from Yuzuho's grip to stare at him.

"Harry?" she whispered. "Harry, is it really you?"

It was Rayne's voice, but she sounded terrified. Harry nodded and pulled her close to him, savoring the warmth of her arms around him. Rayne lay a soft kiss against his shoulder, and he felt something wet there. Tears were streaming down her face now, as she looked at him.

"Where am I?" she wondered. "I remember... I thought I saw my mother, and then..."

"It's alright," he lied, holding her close. "She's alive, Rayne. Her spirit survived you staking her because you missed her heart a little. She's the one who's been rallying all the vampires together."

"My mother..."

Rayne's face fell. "I should have known," she said weakly. "I guess, in a way, I've always known all this time. Something about what was happening felt so familiar to me, but I didn't want to believe it. I wanted to believe she was dead so badly, and now I've dragged you into this. Harry, just..."

"Rayne, no."

"Just leave me here, Harry. Forget about me, and go. If you don't, Yuzuho will use that against you. I've lived with her for most of my life, and I know."

"I have the Heart, Rayne," Harry said, patting the pocket in his cloak. "I got it from Grimmauld Place. She needs it for something, and I think it's to help her come back."

"The Heart of Grindelwald?" she whispered, looking down. "I thought it was just a myth..."

"We have to destroy it. Dumbledore tried, I think, but all it did was burn his hand real bad. There has to be some other way of getting rid of it..."

Rayne looked pained for a second. Harry gazed into her face, and was shocked to see her eyes a different color.

"Rayne," he cried, but it was too late. Rayne shoved him away and fell to her knees. She was crying out now, as if in some terrible, desperate pain. Harry tried to reach out for her, but Rayne drew her wand and sent a curse his way before he could blink. Harry flew back several feet, felt a horrible pain in his side, but ignored it and raised up.

"You're stronger than she is, Rayne!" he called out. "You can beat her back. I know what you're going through, because the same thing happened to me! Fight it."

There was a tear in the side of his cloak and his shirt. Blood was pouring out, and the Heart fell from the new opening to the floor. Harry gave no mind to it, and watched as Rayne slowly got to her feet again. His heart leaped for the barest of seconds, and then he saw the look on her face. It had returned to the same emptiness as before.

Yuzuho had regained control.

"Silly little boy wizard who lived," Yuzuho's voice scolded. "I have known little Rayne all her life, from the moment she was born. I've been in her mind for ages now; do you really think you could keep me away from her for very long? Not even the smell of your blood could keep me out."

"My blood," Harry whispered, taking his hand from his side. Blood coated the fingers from tip to tip.

"Blood has everything in it. That's why we get life from it. Everything you've ever felt or lived through is in there, little Harry. All your memories and pain, all your sweat and joy, all of it runs through that."

"It's always been that way," she went on. "Since the beginning of time, people used blood for all sorts of things. Then vampires came along, and suddenly..."

Yuzuho grinned at him from behind Rayne's face. "Suddenly, it's a bad thing!"

Rayne walked past him without looking his way. "I'll leave you here alone for a bit to think about what you've done," Yuzuho said. "Bad little boys should be sent to their rooms as punishment, but since I haven't made a room for you just yet, this will have to do. Until then, keep the Heart safe and warm for me, Harry. You know what will happen to your little friend, my oh-so naughty daughter, if you don't do what I say, right?"

Harry didn't answer. He waited until Yuzuho had left the room before pounding his fists against the stone floor in anger. Every part of him felt like it was going to explode. He wanted to scream, to roar at the ceiling, and cry out about how unfair all of this was!

But, he didn't.

There was no more time for that. Harry was alone in this, and it was up to him to figure out a way. Looking over at where the Heart had landed, he saw that it had somehow come unraveled from the parcel it was wrapped in. More than that, something very strange had happened! It wasn't noticable in the dim light at first, but as Harry stared, he saw where a small piece had chipped off. It was barely enough to notice, and it might have happened when the Heart fell out of his pocket, but Harry didn't think so. He remembered suddenly the burned hand Dumbledore was sporting when Harry was at Grimmauld Place.

Memories swam up to him in droves. He was in the cemetery with Wormtail, watching as the stumpy wizard held a knife to his arm and drew blood. It was that very blood that proved to be the crucial ingredient Lord Voldemort had needed to return. Blood had been what kept him safe at the Dursleys, why Dumbledore had sent him to Privet Drive at the beginning of every summer.

Blood that was needed to bring Yuzuho back to life.

And suddenly, Harry understood so much. It were as though a great light had come on in his head. He could see everything so clearly now, as if he'd been standing in the dark for so long, and only now stepped under the sun. In a way, he had been. So much of his life had been concealed from him. Harry had wondered many things over the years, but it wasn't under just now that he finally grasped the whole truth.

Dumbledore had given him some knowledge of how this worked. He only hoped that was enough to put an end to all of this. Taking the Heart in his hands, Harry brought it over to the fireplace and sat down. There wasn't much time left, and he still had a few details to work out. There was still the possibility that this wouldn't work, but something in his gut told him to try. Even if this didn't work, he wanted to be there in the end.

For Rayne.

## Chapter 17

### The Daughter of Darkness

by Ri-kun

Harry watched as they brought out the table where Yuzuho's body was to be placed. It was currently resting in, of all things, a coffin. A select number of vampires holding old-fashioned spears and swords were standing around it, guarding against who only knew what. No one present, save perhaps for himself, appeared to have any ill intentions towards it. Even Voldemort's Death Eaters didn't carry the same dark reverence that this place felt of. It was as if it had infected the very air, to the point that poor Harry was almost scared to breath.

He'd been taken from the room after about two hours or so. Yuzuho had apparently wanted him to wait anxiously for her return. It was just as well, because that gave him plenty of time to work out the fine details of his so-called plan. So far, it sounded even to Harry like a far-fetched attempt at madness.

Of course, considering everything he'd been through in the last twenty-four hours, there was the slight possibility that he really had gone mad. What worried him the most, though, was how the prospect didn't seem quite so bad anymore.

The Heart was still in his pocket. For some reason, Yuzuho had been content to leave it with him. Either she knew of what would befall anyone who attempted to destroy it, or she simply didn't see it as important. Of course, Harry wouldn't have bothered to escape with it. Even though the Order was undoubtedly looking for him, he had no means of which to make contact in time. And by the time Harry did return with help, Yuzuho could have subjected Rayne to any number of horrific tortures.

Like it or not, he was here until the very end. The thought comforted him as he waited.

Rayne, meanwhile, had been waiting silently off to the side. Her eyes darted back and forth, watching the different factions of workers as



they prepared for Yuzuho's return. Harry kept hoping to see some sign of life in Rayne's eyes; a glimmer that she was still in there, and knew that he hadn't given up hope. Rayne's lips did move periodically, but whether any actual sound was coming out, he couldn't tell. The vampires seemed to hear each syllable perfectly, however, and moved at once to carry out her orders. Harry reasoned that this must be Yuzuho's doing. She was still using Rayne's body to instruct her minions until the ceremony officially began.

Just thinking about it made Harry's stomach churn just a little. The last time he'd been a part of something like this, someone had died. More than that, Voldemort had returned to his full power, and came close to killing him. Thinking about that just made him want to run, but he resisted. Desperate to ease his mind, though, he groped at the Heart that was in his cloak pocket, just to ascertain that it was still indeed there. The Heart felt hot and somehow sickening through the clothing that separated it from his flesh. As Harry's eyes passed absentmindedly over the coffin that still contained Yuzuho's body. There was a jolt that ran through him, as if he'd been struck by lightning, and somehow the Heart seemed to know what he was seeing. It throbbed in response, and almost appeared to leap out of his cloak pocket.

Harry clamped down on the opening to keep it inside, but the object hadn't shifted the slightest bit. It was still nestled in the folds of his cloak, but Harry knew at once that what he'd felt had been real. He'd had far too much experience in this field of magic to believe otherwise. Rayne's eyes were now intently focused on him, now. She was watching him closely, as though she too had sensed what occurred. Harry tried to keep his mind blank of any thoughts of them out of his head, just in case Yuzuho could use Legillimancy from that distance. It was difficult, particularly with the situation at hand growing ever closer, but Harry did his best. Yuzuho gave no notice of him anymore after a moment, and things moved right along.

Which, in the end, was the biggest part of the problem.

After a while, the vampires that were guarding her body turned around in unison and lifted the heavy casket to their shoulders. It looked impossibly heavy, yet all of them manuevred as if it weighed

nothing, and brought it over to rest in front of the strange altar. Harry felt the Heart throb as he watched them. It seemed that the Heart too sensed what lay nestled inside.

It made Harry wonder once again if any of this would work. There was no time left for doubt, though. He could tell at once that the ceremony was about to begin. Taking the Heart in his hand, he stepped forward as the vampires before him parted. He didn't need to be told what to do. It was obvious somehow from this point on what his purpose in this had been.

Yuzuho watched with a wry grin on her face, still using Rayne's body as a host. It was easy to tell now the differences between them. Harry didn't need to keep his mind blank anymore. Rational thought had left him, and the only thing remaining to push him forward was pure instinct. He handed the Heart over to the vampire standing closest to her, who seized it at once and raised it up as if it were a prized possession. Once it had been displayed to Yuzuho, she then gestured for the nameless vampire to continue.

Harry moved to step back, but was instantly grabbed by two females on either side. His hand grasped around his wand automatically, but Harry made himself release it. Now was not the time just yet. He had to make sure.

He had to wait a little longer.

All that happened, though, was him being brought to stand at Rayne's side. As he did, there was finally enough light in the darkened space to see what actually lay on the altar. Harry felt a chilling sense of déjà vu as he lay eyes on a torn black veil, which billowed out periodically as if brushed by air. There was no wind in this place, though, but he'd known that all along. It was not the wind that disturbed the veil. Nor was it wind that whispered seductively from behind it!

"You have seen it before," Yuzuho said. It was not a question. "Where?"

Harry thought about lying for the sheer hell of it, but resisted. "Down in the Department of Mysteries," he replied. "The Ministry kept it in the center of this arena."

"Ahh," she nodded. "The children here spoke of such a place. That one had been stolen from them by wizards seeking to gain it's secrets. It is heartening to know they have yet to uncover what it truly means."

A year ago, hearing that might have surprised him. There was always the possibility that Yuzuho was lying to him, but Harry didn't think so. The idea of Ministry wizards stealing magic from other races made perfect sense now.

"You mean, that isn't the only one?"

Yuzuho grinned at him, cheekily. "Silly boy, Harry. There is but one Veil in the universe. This is simply a place created where it can touch us, and we in turn it. Our powers have dwindled in the time that wizards have mined other races for knowledge, but this is still one mystery that eludes them. The power to mold and shape the very essence of death."

"Dumbledore," Harry said, roughly. "Thinks the dead never truly leave us. He always talked about death as if it is as natural as life."

"Just like a wizard," she responded, shaking her head. "The polar opposite of nothingness is existence, silly boy. Once nothingness has been called into existence, existence must return to it. That is the whole principle behind the Veil, and the answer behind why vampires continue to thrive and walk the earth, in spite of numerous attempts to wipe them out."

Harry had to think about that for several seconds. "I... don't understand," he admitted, finally.

"You don't need to," said Yuzuho, shrugging. "None of it really matters. In a few short minutes, I will return to this world once more. You and my daughter will be together forever as my good little children, and stay by my side forever. Anything beyond that is inconsequential."

A noise brought his attention away from her for a second, and he saw the remaining vampires gathering together in rows before the altar where the Veil and Yuzuho's casket was presented.

"It is time," she whispered, almost woefully.

Rayne's body seemed to stiffen at once, as if she were having a fit. A whisp of fog drifted then out of her ears and mouth, curling upward at first towards the rafters in the ceiling, before decending to the casket. Harry watched as the vampires all around them froze and looked on. Their faces held a kind of rapturous wonder mixed with reckless anticipation. The last time Harry had seen anything like it was on the faces of some of Voldemort's Death Eaters.

The Veil behind the casket billowed out, and the whispers from beyond it grew, until they rang in his ears. It was impossible that something so soft and faint could put such pressure on him, but it did. More whisps came, each one only slightly distinguishable from the last. These remained floating above Yuzuho's body spinning round and round in a circle, however. Harry watched along with everybody else, feeling an indescribable sensation of dread coming over him. Everything he'd hope for in the last few minutes might be all for nothing. What was more, he himself was about to commit an act that could haunt him for the rest of his life.

Rayne turned to him silently then, her face cold and immovable. Her hand was extended towards him, expectantly. Harry watched her eyes for a moment, hoping for some sign that she was still in there, but all that remained was a blank indifference. It was as if he were looking at some beautifully painted statue, magicked to life but nonetheless dead on the inside.

Without thinking, he reached into his cloak pocket. The Heart was still there, and felt as if it were beating. How he'd missed the feel of it throbbing there so close to his body, seperated by just a few layers of clothing, was unknown. He wanted to think about what he was doing some more. He needed more time to plan things out better, but time had run out. He'd never been that good at planning ahead, anyway. Hermione had been the one to think so much about the future. His

had been so full of uncertainty and doubt for so long that it had just seemed a waste of time to wonder on it too much.

Something clicked in his brain then, and he silently placed the Heart in her hand, still wrapped. She had told him once, not so very long ago, about trusting his instincts. He was going to do that now, even if it meant that was the last thing he ever did.

It seemed strange, in that moment, to think that he could die here. Harry had always assumed he would die in battle with Voldemort, or at the very least, with one of his more powerful Death Eaters. Yet now, he could very well perish before fate had a chance to come claim him.

Rayne, meanwhile, was walking calmly up to the altar where the casket lay open. The Veil pushed outward longingly towards her as she approached, as if trying to stretch far enough to sweep her in. Harry felt his heart quickly for a fraction of a second as he imagined her too being swept away by it, but the ragged black tips couldn't reach anywhere near her. The wisps that had come from it, though, shifted and quickened their circling as she lay the Heart ever so carefully inside.

Harry swallowed, feeling his throat go dry in an instant, and waited.

At first, it seemed like nothing was going to happen, but then Harry realized the ritual wasn't completely over. Rayne raised up a small dagger that apparently had been lying somewhere nearby. Without flinching, she cut her arm and let the blood fall slowly down her arm to land on her mother's still body. Harry then saw why Yuzuho had needed her daughter alive so badly. It was, as she had told him, all about blood.

The blood of her daughter. The blood that was carried by her daughter, whom she had nursed impossibly to life through the use of ancient dark magic. Blood, she had said, was full of what a person was, whether that person was full of darkness and hatred, or a willingness to sacrifice oneself for another's sake.

The moment Rayne's blood splattered, there was a rush that went through the whole expanse of the room, followed by a strange pop in his ears. There was no cauldron this time for him to watch helplessly, but there were also no ropes to bind his arms. He still had his wand on him, but Harry knew automatically that he wouldn't need it. He understood much on this night; things that he couldn't possibly describe in words. Yuzuho was about to die.

The only real question left was, at what cost?

A shiver passed through him, not unlike walking through one of the Hogwarts ghosts. Harry barely registered it, but every vampire in the room reacted as if they'd been struck by an incredibly powerful curse. At once, they all fell backwards to the ground, writhing on the floor in agony. Only he and Rayne stayed on their feet. She was stepping back away from the casket now. The Veil was pulling back inward on itself, as if trying to draw itself away from what was happening.

Then the wisps descended on the body lying below them, and there was a surge of magical light that felt cold to the touch. When Harry could raise up again, he was shivering. All the other vampires were getting to their feet in a scramble, only to drop right back down and kneel.

Yuzuho was out of her coffin now, looking down on everyone. Her body was glowing softly, like cold moonlight wrapped in a halo. She looked almost like a porcelain doll that Aunt Petunia had once kept, before Dudley broke it from chucking his video game controller across the room. Only he and Rayne stayed on their feet, but Yuzuho took no notice of them. She just tossed her head back and laughed.

Coldly and cruelly, she laughed. It echoed about the room like a bad dream that wouldn't go away.

And then, she stopped. "Playtime now," she whispered, smiling.

"Like hell!" Harry cried out, raising his wand.

Yuzuho turned towards him, but even before that, Rayne had leaped through the air. She was on him in a split second, and his wand went

flying. Harry rolled with her, trying to use the momentum to his advantage. Quidditch training kicked in, and he remembered how it felt doing loops around bludgers while diving for the Snitch. They both flipped over and over through the air and on the ground. Harry actually wound up on top of her, disoriented but still alive. The inside of his jaw was bleeding badly. Apparently, he'd bit into it by accident. Inspiration hit him, and as Rayne raised up to seize his arms, he bent forward and kissed her.

Time stood still. The world seemed to hold it's breath for just once instant as his mouth locked with hers.

Harry finally pulled back when he couldn't go without air any longer. A trickle of blood ran down his mouth, but the inside had mysteriously stopped bleeding. His own blood dotted the corner of Rayne's mouth, as well. Her eyes seemed to go strange for a moment, as if she were lost somewhere deep inside herself. Then, she looked up at Harry, smiling.

Her fist connected with his right temple out of nowhere. Harry reeled backwards, stunned by the unexpected blow. His mind was clouded in doubt as she landed one punch after the other on his body, in the shoulders, arms, legs, and sides. The pain was enough to make his breath come in gasps. Through it all, he could hear the cackling of Yuzuho over the cheers of the other vampires surrounding them.

"Kill him!" she shrieked. "Kill him, my love. My daughter!"

Rayne grabbed Harry by the folds of his cloak and threw him. He barely had time to tuck himself in before landing hard on the cold cement floor. His whole body felt like it'd just gone through a match with Slytherin all by himself. As he gathered himself up, Yuzuho drifted forward towards him. She was hovering several feet off the ground, and wearing a grotesque grin that would've done Snape proud!

"It is over, Harry," she whispered sweetly. "Rayne is mine."

"You were never going to let me stay with her. This is what you wanted all along, from the beginning. All you care about is making her suffer."

Yuzuho shook her head, as if chidding him. "Dear boy," she said. "How very precious you are to me. The last thing in life you'll ever know is the feel of your own blood leaving your body, as Rayne drains it. At long last, she'll truly be my child."

"Rayne," Yuzuho called out, over him. "Come forward."

Harry didn't look back, but he could heard each step Rayne made as if they were his own heartbeats. Harry closed his eyes and waited until he felt her take him ever so gently into her arms. Only then did he look up, and smiled. She was looking him in the eyes, and they were shinning.

"Drink him!" her mother cried out, which echoed through her underlings. "Drink him, my pet!"

Rayne drew him up to her. His body fit along hers as if they were lying together so perfectly. The vampires cheered as she drew his neck back, exposing the throbbing vein to the dim light. There was a flash of movement, and a sharp bite of pain.

Then Harry felt nothing.

Time seemed to slow down to a crawl. His body lay limp in her arms as she lowered him back to the ground, her face a mask of neutral emotions. Harry's eyes were blank as they stared up to the ceiling. Yuzuho hovered near, looking down on him.

"Was it good for you?" she inquired, curiously.

"Very," Rayne said, turning to her. "But this is going to feel a hell of a lot better."

"Seizum Apparendium!"



Harry rolled to the side out of the way as the blast sent Yuzuho flying backwards through the air into the awaiting arms of her subjects. The spell didn't stop there, however, and within seconds there were ribbons of fire tracing through the air like birthday streamers.

"Don't look so shocked," Rayne said calmly, as several of the fire bands tore whole arms and legs off the vampires closest to her. "I mean, you really didn't fall for that whole acting bit, did you? I thought you were supposed to know me better than that!"

"Bitch!" Yuzuho screamed. "You're no daughter of mine. You're a demon from the foulest depths. You're a monster!"

"Yeah," Rayne nodded. "And doesn't it just piss you off!"

Harry used the confusion to his advantage, slipping away while the others were busy either running around in panic, or trying to fight Rayne. He needed not worry himself too much on her account, though, because she was in rare form. He actually had to stop for a moment and marvel at her prowess. Either this was a rare occasion for her, or she'd been holding back during their time together. Any vampire that tried to attack her was either burned by the cage of flame ribbons surrounding her, or beaten senseless the moment they got close enough for her to hit. Only Yuzuho seemed to be giving her some trouble, which meant that Harry had to move.

His target was just up ahead, but some of the vampires on the outsides surrounding Rayne noticed him. He was without his wand still, which meant the only option was to run for it. Most of them were much larger than he was, however, and didn't fare so well in the confusion. Harry had spent much of his wizarding life dodging things bent on taking his head off, however, and eluded them almost all the way up to the altar. It wasn't until he reached the first set of steps that one managed to grab the back of his cloak.

Harry didn't let that slow him down, though. Lowering his arms, he dipped one hand into the side pocket to remove the tiny wrapped parcel, then allowed the cloak to fall from his shoulders. The vampire behind him staggered back at the unexpected shift in weight, allowing

him to plunge forward. Each step brought him closer, and there were no more vampires in sight.

But just as he reached the Veil, the wisps were somehow back again. Harry was shocked to see him, but all they did was block his path for a moment. Then, as if sensing something, each one withdrew and hovered back. Some of them even seemed to take on a human shape for a moment. Harry paused, glancing through the faces for a sign of someone familiar. A cry from behind him shook him out of it, and he climbed the last steps without hesitation.

"Harry!"

Harry turned then, and found Rayne at the foot of the steps with her mother's fingers seizing her by the head. Yuzuho had yet to touch the ground, and she was lifting Rayne several inches up effortlessly.

"You filthy little thing," she hissed in Rayne's ear. "I should've killed you when your wretched father left you with me all those years ago! What gives a cursed monster like you the right to live?"

"Harry," Yuzuho said, looking up at him. She was smiling now, as if nothing at all had happened. "Come to mother, sweetie."

Harry looked down at her.

"Go to hell."

The fragment from the Heart of Darkness that Dumbledore had managed to break off burned in his fingers. Harry gripped it for but a second, then tossed the hated thing through the folds of the Veil.

And then, the whole world exploded around them.

## Chapter 18

### Beyond the Veil

by Ri-kun

Ghosts.

Phantoms.

Spirits.

Apparations.

Whatever they were called, they came from the Veil in droves, racing past Harry as he was thrown backwards from the black curtain like a ragdoll. His body landed hard on the steps as they flew past him, but other than the impact, there was no pain. The initial shock must have drove all sensation from him, which was just as well. His mind was far too preoccupied by the fact that he was surely going mad.

Vampires were scattered everywhere and screaming in terror as the whisps came swooping down to claim them. Harry saw all of this as he raised himself up slowly with his arms. He still couldn't feel much, but his arms were like rubber. It took him a moment, working through the haze that clouded over his mind, to assume himself that he was seeing things right.

The entire building had collapsed. Or, more accurately, had been blown outward to splinters. The walls, the ceilings, everywhere but the floor had been shattered by the initial blast that came from the Veil. All the vampires cried out in a mixed unison as their bodies were laid to waste. It was as if he were watching them decompose slowly before his very eyes. Death was finally catching up to them at long last, claiming each one as it's own. Rayne was unconscious at the foot of the stairs; her body lay limp in a twisted angle, but she didn't appear unharmed. Yuzuho had lost her grip.

And Yuzuho...

Yuzuho was screaming louder than all the others. Her voice carried at such a pitch that Harry hadn't taken notice of it at first. Once his ears did, though, it was impossible to tune out. Even the wails of a banshee didn't compare to this! It was like hearing her brought his body back to life, and it was feeling a hundred times the amount of pain it should. Each nerve ending in his body howled with pleas to make it stop somehow.

Harry staggered to his feet somehow. He couldn't remember actually getting up, but his eyes were at once facing upward where Yuzuho's body hung. Horrible, sick green flames roared out of her body from all sides, licking like hungry kittens ate her flesh. Her body alone was still preserved, save for the single hole left in her chest where the Heart had been placed. It was gone now, leaving behind only the fires that were slowly devouring her. Something seemed to click on her face, and she looked down at him.

At once, Yuzuho dove right for Harry. He didn't have time to move away. She was descending on him too quickly, even through the pain that littered her face. A gnarled hand, twisted to resemble something more like a rotted claw, extended for his throat.

"Harry!"

Rayne was coming for him. She was flying up the steps as if her feet never touched him. Yuzuho saw Rayne coming to his rescue, and snarled viciously before plunging even faster. Each one of them was coming for him, but Harry reached first for his wand. The moment he touched his cloak, he remembered how it had been knocked from his hand. Yuzuho was too close, and Rayne would never make it in time.

Yuzuho reached him first, and grabbed a handful of his shirt collar. The moment she touched him, however, the flames recoiled away as though repulsed by his very presence. This seemed to shock Yuzuho even more than it did him, but neither had enough time to ponder the meaning. The moment her claws brushed his skin, Rayne appeared out of nowhere and shoved Harry back away. At the same time, Yuzuho's body was bathed in light once again, only this one had a source.

The flames had changed color, to a brilliant, hot white. The air sizzled and cracked around the two women as they wrestled with each other. Harry tried to reach for them, to pull Rayne away. He had a sudden feeling that something dreadful was about to happen. But they were too far away already, and the heel of his shoe somehow connected to the floor at the wrong angle, and he was falling backwards.

The sight of the black torn curtains came into view out of the corner of his eye, and Harry suddenly remembered where he'd been standing. Right in front of the Veil, which had once claimed Sirius. Harry tried to turn in mid-motion, but only managed to get a good look of the curtains as they parted to claim him. Perhaps, the thought occurred to him, he would finally get to see Sirius again after all...

And then, Rayne's voice came loud and clear. She was calling out his name, over and over again, and something inside of him broke through. His hand reached out as though of its own accord, and snagged the very edge of the ragged curtain. Momentum hurled his body forward still, but only for a little ways. He hung there against the very edge of where the Veil began, caught in a silent windswept malestrom between life and death. The silence that lay beyond was somehow burning his mind apart. He couldn't think, or even breathe; his lungs were squashed together between some kind of invisible iron press.

"Harry!"

Harry raised his head up, but couldn't see a thing.

"Harry!"

"Help me!"

His cry shattered the vacuum, and a pair of hands wrapped around the fingers that still clung desperately to what remained of the Veil. His body was jerked backwards, and suddenly, Harry was on his feet again and falling forwards on top of Rayne. She still held on desperately to his fingers as her own body was sandwiched between the hard floor and him. The world was spinning once again around him, and he had no idea what had just happened.

"Harry," she croaked, weakly. "Are you alright, Harry?"

"Rayne," he gasped, around first, then down at her. "I'm fine, I guess. What was that?! Where did all of the vampires..."

Then he saw her face, and panicked. "Rayne! What's wrong!"

Her skin had gone from pale, to a near-death puce. Her face was sunken in, as though the flesh were trying to wrap itself tightly around her skull. The area around her eyes was blackened, and the pupils themselves had dialated horribly.

"Yuzuho," Rayne mumbled. "She did something to me... Took something from me when she grabbed me. You stopped her before... she could kill me outright, but..."

"Wait here! I'll go and get help."

"It's too late, Harry." Rayne took his arm weakly in her boney fingers and held on. "I'm dying, Harry. I can feel it all the way to my core. She took something that I needed, trying to save herself. It didn't work, though. I guess... that's good enough."

"Don't talk like that! We'll... fix this somehow."

"Harry, thank you... for everything. I'm so sorry for what I've done. I... wish I had more time to explain things."

"You don't have to explain anything. I..."

"I'm glad I met you, Harry. However we were brought together, I'm still glad I met you."

Her eyes fluttered closed, and Harry grabbed her as she fell forward. There was very little muscle left in her, and it felt like he was holding on to a withered up old corpse. His hand trembling, Harry brushed a hair aside from her face and looked into it. She seemed so peaceful all of a sudden. A burning resolve rose up from his chest, then. Gently, he lay her down on the stone and rose up. Looking at her for

a moment, Harry marched off purposefully to the left of the Veil, which had grown silent. What very little remained of the warehouse was completely empty now. Every vampire here had been incenerated.

Harry wasn't sure he'd be able to find it at first. There was so much rubble and junk lying around to sort through, and the whole process seemed to take forever. It had to be somewhere here, though. He had to believe it didn't get thrown farther out when the place exploded. A small buzzing grew in the back of his head as he dug through the waste. The closer he seemed to draw towards it, the louder it got. It was like his wand was calling to him, whispering in his ear from afar to bring them together.

He had almost given up hope, but then he saw it. It was right below him, just an inch or two shy of his right foot. Harry felt a swell of triumph, and gripped it in his hands for a second before racing back to where Rayne still lay.

She looked, if anything, no different than before. Her chest wasn't rising with breath, but he could detect the faintest of rattling when he pressed his ear near her mouth. Rayne was still breathing, but it sounded as if her heart was about to give out. He didn't have much time left!

Harry pressed the tip of his wand to his skin, right where his wrist was, and drew it down sharply. The tip of the wand pierced it magically, and blood poured out from the cut. Kneeling down, Harry brought the fresh wound to Rayne's lips and pressed. Blood ran down the side of her mouth, but she didn't so much as stir. Forcing back tears, Harry tried repeatedly to revive her, but she wasn't responding.

"Ennervate!"

The spell seemed to go through Rayne like a bullet. Her body jerked once, as if hit by a bolt of electricity, and the area around them shone brightly for the briefest of seconds. Rayne gasped in pain, but before she could fall back down again, Harry grabbed her and shoved his wrist into her open mouth. The lids of her eyes grew heavy again, as though she were about to pass out again. Harry felt her lips close

around the wound, however, and relaxed a little as she began to drink from him.

Lying there, he held her in his arms as she sucked the blood hungrily from his body. At first, her grip on his arm was weak. That gradually changed the more blood she took. He felt the strength returning to her fingers as she dug in deeper. Rayne began to worry with his wrist like a mad dog. When her teeth bit into him, the pain shot through his body like a knife, but he didn't move away.

All of a sudden, she tore away from his body and gasped. Her hands were gripping his arm tight enough to break it, and Harry had to jerk free to keep her from accidentally tearing it out of socket again. He quickly seized her arms and held her in place as she began to jerk. Gradually, the seizures faded, and she began to relax against his body.

"Better now?"

The question sounded ridiculous, but his brain was slightly addled at this point. If Rayne noticed, however, she didn't let on.

"A little," she whispered, weakly. "I don't know if it will last, though."

"Why not?" Harry wracked his brain. "Is there something else?"

"I don't know how to explain it, Harry. It's like... there's this big piece of me missing somewhere deep inside. Yuzuho tore it out when she was trying to take my life energy away from me. I think she believed she could save herself with it, but it didn't work. I can feel that it's still gone, though. It's like she tore away a part of my soul."

"Do you need more blood?" Harry offered his wrist up, but Rayne quickly turned away.

"More blood won't help," she told him. "Somehow, I know. Blood alone isn't enough to fix what she did to me."

A tear slid down his face. "Rayne, don't leave me."



"Just... stay with me, Harry. Stay with me, for however long I have left."

More tears followed. "Always," he swore. "Always, Rayne."

Harry brushed a hand down her cheek ever so gently. As Rayne turned back to face him, he lowered his head to take her lips in his. Her mouth tasted of blood; his blood. He could taste himself on her as they kissed. Her hand wrapped around his, lacing their fingers together like old lovers. Slowly, ever so carefully, he lowered her to the ground.

Raising up, Harry shuffled out of his cloak, then leaned over her with his arms propped up as if doing a halfway push-up. She was watching him the whole time with tears in her own eyes. Leaning in, Harry placed the lightest of kisses on her eyelids. Her tears tasted bitter in his mouth, but he kissed each and every one away. Making his way down, he again took her mouth into his, this time much more forcefully. Rayne moaned as she raised up a little to meet him.

He wasn't sure how they wound up naked. Rayne's hand were suddenly trailing up and down over the bare skin of his backside. Her legs opened a little, and he found himself sliding down between them. His body seemed to know what to do instinctively. Pushing up a little more, he nudged her thighs apart, then thrust forward. Rayne let out a gasp, but rose up to meet him. Together, they locked that way, moving to meet one another over and over again.

Then Rayne was crying his name out over and over again. It was the only thing Harry could hear, since his head felt so heavy and clouded. He could see lights all around, better than anything the Weasley twins could have come up with. She cried out, writhing beneath him, and something shot through Harry's body like an arrow. He kept going, though, and rode with her through what might have been an enormous wave.

Her skin was shining, now. Both their bodies glistened with sweat, and he could see the muscles beneath her flesh moving with new strength. He could feel his own body, burning like the sun, to meet with her. Rayne locked one of her legs around him, and turned

somehow. He was suddenly beneath her, looking up into her face. Her eyes sparkled now with a new intelligence. Slowly at first, she began to move her hips back and forth.

The room around them swam, as if fading away into nothingness. No sound but a roaring filled his ears. Everything centered around her being on top of him, riding him as if he were a mad hippogriff trying to buck him off. Harry held on for dear life, and raised his hips up to thrust hard into her. Rayne laughed, a joyous sound that rang out through the night. His ears, his whole body even, was filled with the sound, and it made him laugh with her.

Rayne leaned forward and captured his mouth forcefully. Harry raised up to meet her, and as he did, exposed his next ever so slightly. Rayne had his head in a vice grip as she kissed him hard, then worked her way down to the throbbing pulse beating just below the surface. Harry didn't try to stop her. If anything, he ran his fingers through her hair and pushed her towards it. This seemed to be all the encouragement she needed.

Her fangs bit into him, and Harry bucked his hips up in response. As she sank through his skin to the vein below, he began thrusting in earnest. His arms wrapped around her, holding her in place as she took from his body. He rode her harder than ever as his life's blood filled her, followed by his own seed.

Harry felt himself go, and went with her all the way into the light.

The last thing he remembered before fading away were her words whispering softly in his ear.

"I love you, Harry Potter."

Author's Notes: Sorry for the short chapter. Real life has been getting in the way of updating regularly. There's only one more chapter to go, though!

## Chapter 19

### Rayne's Letter

by Ri-kun

By the time this reaches your hands, Harry, I will have been long gone. I know that must seem terribly unfair to you, and I don't begrudge you hating me for it. But this seems like the only option for me. I must put as much distance between myself and you if we're to ever be truly safe from Yuzuho.

I know that you will find some way to defeat her. I know that you can do it, and that you'll go on to complete your destiny. Just like everyone expects you to! But I know that you're going to do it. You're much braver than I could ever hope to believe, and a better friend than I could ever deserve. Don't spend the rest of your life waiting for me to come back to you. I have this feeling that our time together has come to an end; at the very least, for now.

I love you, Harry. If there is nothing else that was true about the time we spent in each other's company, please believe me when I say that this much is. I have loved you as I never loved nor cared for anything in this world, and as no one has ever loved and cared for me. You showed me the world in a whole new light, and for that I am eternally grateful.

There is nothing in the world more powerful than goodness. You've shown that to me, and I finally realized just how true it is. When I looked into your eyes, I knew. I understood things that'd eluded me for years. Perhaps, I was simply trying to hide from them, but no more. Yes, it was me that was in your room that night. The dream you had was no dream, nor was it an illusion crafted by my wicked mother's dark powers. She had nothing to do with it. I simply couldn't bear watching over you for so long without being close enough to touch you. For just one night, I wanted you to see me, and know who I was. I didn't think anything could possibly come from it, but you proved I was wrong.

My heart aches a little bit when I think about how I might not see you again. I have my lucid moments, but they are few and short. I've stolen enough time from her to write you this letter. Whether I live through this night or not, I am putting an end to things. Something tells me that you'll try and save me. You're brave and honorable like that. I get the impression somehow that people have made you think that this is a weakness.

It is one of the things I love about you most of all. Please, don't ever do anything to change that!

Also, there is one other thing I wish to speak with you about. I don't remember much, but there was one point early this night where I was near the Veil. You don't know anything about it, but it is an ancient relic that the vampire clans claim was their own thousands of years past. The Veil is a doorway between here and the After. To go near it is to bring yourself closer to what lies beyond, and when I stood near it, my mind seemed to free itself of Yuzuho's influence momentarily. I thought I saw someone beaconing to me, trying to draw my attention. I don't know who it was, but the man was dressed in a wizard's robe, and next to him was a massive dog.

Now that I think on it, the dog resembled the Patronus you produced back in that alley when we were attacked from behind. The Patronus that you said was different from the one you used to own; it looked just like it. But the man asked that I give a message to you. He said that you would be visiting him soon. I don't know what that means, and it's so hard to think at this point. My hand feels like it weights a hundred pounds all on its own. Writing is a painful burden, but I must go on for your sake. There is still so much you need to know.

My mother has been whispering in my ear. I can block her out for only a few minutes more, just enough to give you this message. She had told me that she would take me to see my father if I cooperated. I confess that a part of me wanted to believe her. It was almost enough at first to go along, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. You mean so much more to me than a faceless stranger who abandoned me as an unborn infant. And I have learned that the half-truths she peddles out are not worth the price that comes with them.

She told me that you were going to kill my father, Harry. I don't believe her, but something tells me in my gut that you understand what she means. If there is a chance, please try and redeem him. But if not, I know you'll do the right thing. I wish there was a way I could be there. I wish my life could have been better, with people who care about me the way your friends do, but I suppose the stars were against it. Please take care of them for me, and know how much you mean to me. I have waited my whole lonely life for someone like you.

She pushes against the walls in my mind even now, demanding entry. I will fight for as long as I can, just long enough to summon an owl who will take this letter to you at the Weasley's. That way, you will know what has happened, and how I came to die.

My mother has always had power over me. I just thought for so long that this was the way it should be. From the time I was born, she has loathed my existence. She used me to satisfy her own ends, and took her frustrations out when things wouldn't go her own way. Behind her eyes always, however, was a deeply rooted hatred for me. I had assumed for a time that she blamed me for my father leaving. In the end, however, none of that mattered.

I think, in the end, she just envied the fact that I was alive. I could feel and interact with the whole in a way that was lost to her forever. She had a glimpse of it, I suspect, before I was born. Afterwards, though, it was like being thrown back into the darkness that had spawned her.

I was my mother's chief enforcer, doing things that shame me to this day. Her hold on my mind kept me from resisting, but gradually I learned how to fight back. When I decided to leave, she threw me in a dungeon that had been fashioned just for me. It was her preferred method of punishing me whenever I tried to overcome her. I escaped this time, however. All the training she'd put me through had finally paid off, and I was able to deal an ironic blow to her. In the end, we wound up fighting each other in a cave, one overlooking the side of the ocean as the sun rose. I tried striking her through the heart, but something had gone wrong. She still had enough influence in me that I didn't hit the heart, but rather merely damaged it. Yuzuho was trapped, and her body slowly decayed, yet her spirit survived. I,

meanwhile, walked out into the sunlight for the first time since my time at Durmstrang, opting to flee overseas.

My life has been very strange and complicated. So many times, I wondered whether it was worth anything. That question was finally resolved the day I met you. Even though it was Yuzuho who arranged for me to spy on you, a part of me is still grateful. It was thanks to her that I met you, and wound up having the best time of my life. If nothing else, I can die peacefully that way.

Love always,

Rayne

Harry spent the last week of summer holiday in a sort of wistful daze, only going through the motions of eating, sleeping, and hanging out with his friends. Rayne's letter, which had arrived via an albino bat after he awoke, was tucked away in his pocket. He carried it with him everywhere he went. He suspected Ginny and the others knew this, and was grateful when they didn't bring it up. They'd been in his room when the bat flew through carrying it tied to its leg, and waited while he read it. He managed to get through without shedding a single tear, but afterwards, there was a huge gaping hole in his chest for the remainder of his days at the Burrow.

He'd awoken to find himself in the twins' old room, bandaged almost from head to toe. His body had looked as if it had been involved in a horrible train accident, and it had taken quite a bit of effort to stumble down the hall to the bathroom. On the way back, he'd bumped into Ginny by accident, whose cries had woken up the whole house.

Apparently, the Order had located the warehouse just a few minutes after it exploded. Mr. Weasley never did say how exactly, but the look on his face gave Harry an idea. Only he had been left there alive. Neither Rayne nor Yuzuho's burned carcass could be found, and there hadn't been enough time to do a complete search. According to Arthur Weasley, the Ministry officials had already been on their way when they left. Harry had hoped to hear that there had been a clue left, some sign hidden in an out-of-the-way place that would guide him to Rayne's location. Professor Lupin had promised to let him

know when they heard something, but he wasn't so convinced anymore.

Things between him and the rest of the inhabitants at the Burrow, particularly his elders, were strained these days. More than once, he caught Mrs. Weasley or Remus Lupin glancing his way from the corner of their eyes whenever they thought he wasn't looking. For the most part, Harry chose to remain hidden in his room, or outside with Hermione and Ron. They were both curious about the letter that Rayne had mailed to him, which he knew they suspected dealt with what happened after he left. He appreciated their giving him space until he was comfortable talking about it, but by the looks in Ron's eyes, their patience was running out!

Perhaps the only silver lining was the approach of the first term. He only had a few days left before it would be time to depart for Hogwarts. The time until they would board the train from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters seemed to take forever. Harry tried to keep himself busy by making sure he'd packed everything he would need for this year. All of his books were stored away. He had put all of his spare clothes and school robes into his trunk, along with his Firebolt broom and potion supplies. He hadn't forgotten anything, at least as far as he could remember.

Harry was not alone in his perusal. Hermione spent much of her time in the closing summer days running around her room, throwing things about haphazardly in search of some small key item she insisted had been stolen or misplaced deliberately, only to discover later that she'd already packed it the first time around. The third time this occurred, Ron had stormed out of the room without saying a word, and refused to help her put the room back together again. He didn't speak to either of them for the rest of the day, leaving Ginny to fill in as their third companion. She was spending a lot of time with them these days. Harry was finding her presence comforting.

Even though he silently wished it were Rayne sitting next to him.

It was the one thought that haunted him constantly. After her letter, Harry was sure she was still alive out there somewhere. He couldn't remember anything after passing out, and for obvious reasons, had

omitted certain details leading up to the moment that he lost consciousness. The letter was a sign, however. It had to be. She'd obviously written it before the ceremony had taken place, but it had to mean that she was still out there. All he had to do was wait for her to contact him. As the days wore on, though, he was growing more and more worried. The day before he was supposed to leave, he managed to pull Bill aside for a moment. Harry hated to ask, but as it turned out, Bill was more than happy to help. He swore to keep Harry informed of what was happening, and alert him the moment any sign of Rayne turned up. He'd wanted to thank him, but all Bill did was wink before walking off, as though he understood perfectly.

As he watched him and Fleur together on the couch that evening, Harry began to suspect that Bill did just a little bit.

It was that evening that Harry received a very unexpected visitor. Mrs. Weasley was just about to call everyone to the kitchen for supper. She'd been planning a special feast to celebrate them going off to Hogwarts for their sixth year, when there was a knock at the door. Arthur Weasley came into the living room a moment later with a tall, muscular man following close behind. Harry thought he looked familiar, but it wasn't until the man stepped around in front of Mr. Weasley to shake his hand that it finally clicked.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley said tentatively. "This is Rufus Scrimgeour, the new Minister of Magic. Minister..."

"Harry Potter," the Minister interjected. "Such an honor, really. I've been hoping to catch you before you left for Hogwarts. Really, this is an honor."

Harry reluctantly shook hands with the Minister, but had a bad feeling the whole time. By the look on Mrs. Weasley's face as she watched from the kitchen doorway, he had every right to.

"And Arthur! How have you been? Very nice job last week, tracking down that Fletcher character who was fencing phoney Dark Detectors."



The Minister didn't let go of Harry's hand as he reached into his coat pocket. If anything, his grip seemed to tighten as he handed a red manilla envelope over to him. "Just something I was asked to deliver to you. It's a note from your son, Percival Weasley. Very bright young man you've got there, Arthur. I bet you and Molly are both very proud of him."

No one in the room said a word. Mrs. Weasley looked as if she wanted to cry, while Arthur just stood there a moment as stiff as a petrified ghost, holding the envelope. It was clear to everyone, including Harry, that the Minister didn't know much about the Weasley family. It was also clear that he hadn't come by here simply to deliver someone else's mail. Harry would have stepped back, but the Minister still hadn't let go of his arm yet. The pressure on it was enough to make it feel numb, slightly. He thought he saw Bill make a slight gesture, but Arthur quickly shook his head behind Rufus Scrimgeour's back. Fleur placed a reassuring hand on his arm, forcing him to sit still.

"As long as I'm here, you wouldn't mind having a private word with me outside, would you, Harry?"

This was obviously the real reason why the Minister had come all this way. Everyone looked as if they were about to protest, yet their eyes remained glued to him, as if waiting for a signal. Harry considered the new minister for a moment. Up close, it was even more obvious why he was put into office over Cornelius Fudge. Rufus Scrimgeour looked more the part of a Minister of Magic, especially when the most feared Dark Wizard in a century had recently come back. People probably thought he had a better chance at defeating Lord Voldemort.

"I'll go," he replied simply.

Arthur looked his way like he was going to protest, but Harry ever so slightly shook his head. "Wonderful!" the Minister replied. "Come this way, Harry."

"Don't be too long," Mrs. Weasley said kindly as they passed her. "Dinner will be ready soon."

Harry nodded his thanks, but followed Rufus out to the front yard. It was awfully quiet this evening as the sun stretched slowly towards the west. The Minister lead him all the way down the front yard, nearly to the end of the driveway. Harry remembered that this was as far as the Anti-Apparation Field extended. If they went beyond this, anyone could appear in front of them.

Harry stopped short of it, and refused to take another step. "This is far enough," he stated. "No one will hear us now."

"Why not go just a bit further?" Rufus pressed. "Just to be sure."

"I don't think so. See, the Burrow has security placed around it, and if we stepped just a little bit farther out, it would be possible for someone to Apparate around us and attack. Or, Apparate in and carry one of us off. I really don't think you should be putting yourself at risk, especially on my account."

Rufus considered him. "Right then, Harry. You very are astute for your age. Dumbledore must be very proud of you. You wouldn't happen to know what he's been up to these days."

"Why would I know where Dumbledore goes? I haven't seen him since he visited me at the start of the summer term."

"So he has been out to your aunt and uncle's home, then. We'd heard rumors, but no one close to him could verify. Might I ask why?"

"Does the Ministry need to know what he was doing there? It had nothing to do with anything outside of personal business."

"What sort of personal business?"

Harry sighed. "My godfather died recently. You might remember him; his name was Sirius Black."

The Minister did not react to the name, so Harry went on. "He was wrongfully accused of crimes that had been committed by Peter Pettigrew, who is also known as Wormtail, a Death Eater who helped

Voldemort return to power. I was mentioned in Sirius' will, and Dumbledore brought the lawyer to meet with me."

"I see. Did Dumbledore mention anything to you while he was there. Anything about where he had been for the last several weeks, or where he might be going."

"I don't think so," Harry replied evenly, meeting Rufus Scrimgeour's staring eyes. "Why would the Ministry need to know where Dumbledore has been?"

"Harry, let's be honest with each other here..."

"That would be a first."

The look Scrimgeour gave him was not friendly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I wasn't aware the Ministry was into being honest with people these days. From what I've seen, there have been a lot of things going on that people should be made aware of, but no one is talking about them. The Daily Prophet keeps going on about measures people should take to prevent Death Eaters from entering their homes, but the number of attacks aren't going down. If anything, the number of Muggle attacks are going up."

"The Ministry is doing everything it can to safeguard Muggle lives, Harry. These are trying times, and our biggest priority is to make sure that..."

"The Ministry's biggest priority these days seems to be to save itself. That, and deliver mail that could have easily been sent by owl post."

"Where has Dumbledore been disappearing to these last weeks, Harry?" Scrimgeour was losing all pretense now, which suited Harry just fine. "For that matter, where have you been for the last several days. My sources tell me that there has been no sign of you at the Burrow. You simply vanished shortly after the attack in Diagon Alley."

"An attack that was only mentioned in passing in the Daily Prophet," he cut back, sharply. "On a page at the very bottom, somewhere near the back. The Ministry is having the Burrow watched while wizards and Muggles alike are being slaughtered, and preventing the Prophet from telling people what's really happening. Give me one good reason why I should answer you, Minister."

"I could take you with me," he said calmly after a moment. "Against your will. We have ways of making you talk, Potter. In the Ministry of Magic, no one would ever find you."

"Go ahead, then. The thing is, you can't take me anywhere so long as I don't cross the Apparation line."

"Do you really think I can't handle one underage wizard who's not allowed to do magic outside of school?"

"I've done all sorts of magic outside of school, Minister," Harry replied casually. "Check my record if you don't believe me. And if you really thought I was no match for you, you wouldn't have wasted all this time talking. Tell me, just how many Aurors are waiting beyond that line, ready to jump me on your word?"

Rufus Scrimgeour stared into his face for several seconds. "Dumbledore has taught you well."

"It wasn't Dumbledore who taught me, Minister. I had another teacher, and she is very good at what she does!"

Scrimgeour tried to stare him down, but it had little effect on Harry. "I will ask you," he breathed impatiently. "One last time. Where have you and Dumbledore been these past few weeks. Are you working together to bring down Voldemort?"

"I have no idea where Dumbledore has been," Harry said, truthfully. "I wasn't even aware the Ministry was looking for him until you told me just now. And as for where I've been, that's my own business."

"The Aurors don't need to Apparate over the line, you know," he warned. "They can cross over it the same way I did. One word from

me, and they'll come charging for you in a heartbeat. You'll be surrounded, and completely at my mercy."

"I was never at your mercy, Minister. And do you honestly believe a single one of them will raise a hand against me?"

"They will on my command," Scrimgeour insisted, and even Harry could hear the doubt in his voice. "I was Head of the Auror Office before asked to take over the Ministry. There isn't a single person in that department who isn't totally devoted to me!"

"I'd make sure of that if I were you. Goodnight Minister."

"Harry..."

"I think I hear Mrs. Weasley calling for me. She likes for all of us to sit down and eat supper together. I try to think that I would've done the same thing with my parents. If they'd lived this long, I mean."

"People think that you are the Champion of the Wizarding world. They think that it's your duty to save all of us. Are you just going to turn your back on them?"

Those words made Harry stop short and look back momentarily. "Of course not. I know that better than anyone, least of all you, could possibly imagine. I just don't want to be taken advantage of along the way. If the Ministry of Magic believes that saving the Wizarding world means being on the top of the pile, then I don't want to be a part of it. No matter how big the pile gets. That's Voldemort's way of doing things."

"This is simply how wars are won, Harry. The Ministry intends to win with or without you. You could be remembered as the greatest wizard that ever lived. People will remember your name for the remainder of history! Wouldn't that be something to tell your grandchildren? Your great-grandchildren?"

"Assuming I lived long enough to have them," he countered. "Somehow, I don't think I would do it your way. I'll say it one last

time, Minister. You can call the Aurors on me if you want, but I'm going inside to eat dinner with my family. Goodnight."

Harry walked all the way back to the Burrow without looking behind him once. He felt Rufus Scrimgeour's eyes on him the whole time, but there was no sound of anyone coming after him. He reached the front door and pulled it open to find the entire Weasley clan sitting there expectantly. He met each of their worried expressions for a moment with a calm neutrality, and then smiled.

"So, what's for dinner?"

The End

Coming Soon...

Harry Potter and the Oracle of Four Seasons